



庵田定夏
Sadanatsu Ando

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ココロコネクト カコランダム

庵田定夏

ファミ通文庫

KOKORO-CONNECT KAKO-RANDOM

ココロコネクト
カコランダム

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終業式、文研部のメンバーは謎の文字を見つけた。「永瀬・稲葉・桐山・青木」、そして「12時・17時」。誰が書いたのか、意図すら分からず、首をひねる五人。だが彼らは12時に、信じられない光景を目にする。子供に戻った伊織と唯、二人は身体と精神が幼くなっている……!? 17時にピタリと止まる奇妙な条件、姿を現さないへふうせんかすら、そしてただ一人現象が起らない太一に、謎の影が忍び寄る——！ 愛と青春の五角形コメディ、大波乱の第三巻!!

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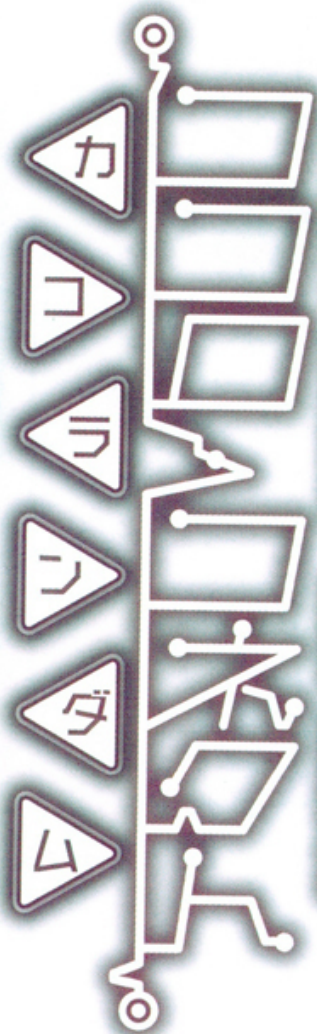
1988年生まれ大阪出身。
第11回えんため大賞特別賞を
受賞しデビュー。好きな食べ
物は『麺類全般』、嫌いな食
べ物は『特になし』。好きな
プロレスの技は『シュートイ
ングスタープレス』、嫌いな
プロレスの技は『見栄えより
危険度の方が高い技全般』。
健康と安全をモットーに生き
ています。


白身魚

Shiromizakana

繊細かつ柔らかな絵柄で知ら
れる実力派イラストレーター。
『14歳』『少年少女』という
キーワードにひたすら弱く、
小説では『カラフル』『アー
モンド入りチョコレート』のワ
ルツ』、実写では『花とアリ
ス』などが好き。

KOKORO-CONNECT KAKO-RANDOM





あ、おかした。
好きな食べていいの？

きりやま ゆい
桐山 唯
11歳

ちゅうしたら、
おとなになるの？

いなほ ひのこ
稲葉 姫子
4歳



え？ラブホ？

やがしたいち
八重樫太一

12
歳

あおきよしふみ
青木義文
10
歳

ながせ いおり
永瀬伊織

6歳

おつてぐでちゃっへ

「わたしのことは
誰にも話さない。
とても大事」

12/25

「過去をやり直せるとしたら、
君はやり直したいと
思うかい？」

12/27

「なんで……
なんであたしが責められなきゃなんないの!?
なんであたしが悪いのよ!?
人が変わってなにが悪いのよ!?
昔のことなんて知らないっ!」

12/28

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Prologue - January 1 of This Year

On New Year's Day, Yaegashi Taichi visited the local shrine.

This area was usually calm and relaxing, but today it was thriving with worshipping visitors and street vendors.

Among the crowd veiled with the aroma of spice and sweets, Taichi and Inaba Himeko, who was dressed in a black long coat, were panic-stricken.

"Gah——Darn it! I don't see him on this side either."

Inaba let out a white breath and ran her fingers through her windblown, mid-length straight black hair.

"Inaba you couldn't find him either? ...Where did he go?"

"Where did he go~"

"Go~"

One of Taichi's hands was holding onto the hand of a girl who **looked like a shrunk, grade-schooler Kiriama Yui**, and his other hand was holding onto the hand of a girl who **looked like a shrunk, kindergartener Nagase Iori**. The two girls echoed the conversation.

Taichi's company of five came for Hatsumode^[1], but one of them got lost on the way.

"I guess we really shouldn't have come to this crowded place..."

Inaba responded to what Taichi said in a displeased tone:

"We're already here, it can't be helped."

"Can't be helped~"

"Helped~"

"We have to find him quickly... It'd be dangerous for an ordinary child to get caught in any trouble, not to mention his current state..."

Very dangerous indeed.

"You don't need to remind me, I know it's bad. Pfft! I should've given him my cell phone... But then he's gonna play with it and mess it up..."

"We should say that coming here to worship was a bad idea to begin with."

"Quit complaining. Taichi, you're the one who said 'We made a promise to celebrate New Year together after all' and voted for it."

"Voted for it~!"

"It~!"

"You've been noisy the whole time, you two brats over there!"

As if to vent her frustration, Inaba lashed out at them.

But the Kiriya Yui look-alike and Nagase Iori look-alike didn't seem to have heard her at all.

"Noisy~"

"Sy~"

"These two are hopeless... it's never going to end. Forget it, let's hurry up and find Ao... I mean, Yoshifumi."

Just as Inaba and Taichi, who was holding on to the two girls, were about to split up and search, a boy that **looked to be a grade-schooler Aoki Yoshifumi** strolled towards them from the front.

"Hey Inaba-nee-chan, I wanna buy a toffee apple, give me money!"

He seemed oblivious that he was lost.

"Haa-!"

"Ouch!"

Needless to say, the boy took a beating from Inaba (a single hand chop).

"Wha—What~ It wouldn't hurt to buy me one~"

What seemed to be a miniature Aoki protested with teary eyes.

"You made us worried sick, and now you have the gall to say that?"

"...Inaba, you don't have to scare him like that. He's fine now, right? But wandering off on your own like that is bad, okay?"

Aoki look-alike replied, "Okay!"

He didn't seem to mean any harm. Once reminded, he would properly keep his promise.

"Well, Inaba, why don't you buy him a toffee apple?"

"Huh? We already bought him cotton candy... Oh well, I'm going to be asking Aoki for the money back later anyway... Hey, here you go."

"Hooray!"

After he received money from Inaba, the Aoki look-alike gleefully queued for the sweets.

"Come back right away when you're done!"

Taichi reminded him. But since he was still within sight, he shouldn't get lost again.

Well, that solved the problem nicely.

"Oh yeah, are you two all right?"

"We got this~!"

"This~!"

The two girls who were looking up at Taichi proceeded to put their temporarily forgotten cotton candy in their mouths.

"There's no need to be courteous, you know. Onii-chan will buy it for you."

"You sure like to spoil little girls, don't you?"

"Please don't limit who I spoil to 'little girls'. Normally speaking, I spoil all children."

Bearing possible suspicions just for being nice to little girls... Society has really changed.

"Well if you're gonna spoil children so much, may I have my share of favour as well?"

"You're asking me to treat you?"

"That~ is~ correct!"

"Why must I treat Inaba..."

Taichi wanted to protest, but he stopped short. Remembering how he was always indebted to Inaba for her help and adding that he felt a bit guilty towards her, a treat would not hurt.

"...my wallet is in my back pocket. Take as much as you like."

"Gotcha."

Inaba swiftly took out his wallet and picked out a 100 yen coin.

"This should be ideal..."

"Hm? 100 yen isn't gonna buy you anything, would it?"

"It's fine. Wait for me here a bit."

Inaba left those words and ran towards a takoyaki vendor nearby.

Taichi looked out to the other side. The Aoki look-alike hadn't gotten his toffee apple yet and was still in the queue. Seemed like it would take a while.

Inaba came back with a dish of six takoyaki.

"Here, open your mouth."

"Wait what—— Why?"

"I can't finish all six, but I felt like getting some takoyaki. So I want you to help me with two. I've already had you pay for one third of the price, so you've got every right to eat two. OK?"

Inaba gave her reason promptly and fluently, as if it was rehearsed beforehand.

"Okay, but I can help myself——"

"Your hands are busy, no?"

"I'll just let go——"

"You said you want to keep the girls from running off though. And besides, you two don't wanna let go either, right?"

"Don't wanna let go~!"

"Don't wanna~!"

"What they said."

...It felt as if he was set up. There was no way out of it.

"Fine... but let it cool a little first——"

Foo~ Foo~

"There. All cool."

He never would have thought that after calming one storm, a new trial(?) would arise.

Taichi surrendered and opened his mouth.

"Ah~ Open wider."

"Ah... Ah~"

The takoyaki and Inaba's face were closing in.

Taichi was so embarrassed that he wanted to look away, but it felt awkward, so he faced towards Inaba again.

His eyes were then connected to that slender pair of eyes under those long eyelashes.

Eyes that captured you and wouldn't let you go.

The takoyaki was put into his mouth-

Click.

The sound of a camera shutter came. Taichi jolted and faced towards its source.

There stood a female in kimono attire who was holding a cell phone.

Her glasses were gleaming.

And her usual tied up hair was ornamented with a hairpin.

This female in such flawless attire was none other than the class representative of class 1C, also known as the 'Love Specialist (commonly known as)' and the 'Missionary of Love (self proclaimed)'——Fujishima Maiko.

"Fancy seeing you here, Inaba-san, Yaegashi-kun. Happy New Year."

One storm subsided, and in came a new one.

She would always pick such a timing to show up that one couldn't help but suspect: She didn't plan this, did she?

Anyway, Taichi and Inaba first responded with "Happy New Year".

"Say, that was really an interesting moment. I couldn't help but to take a photo of it."

"(Sounds of chewing) ...Don't take photos, delete it."

Taichi said assertively, but since he was chewing, it didn't sound very convincing.

Leaving that photo in her phone would be very problematic.

"No way. This kind of love-filled harem scene is a rare sight these days."

"It's not a harem."

"If the sight of you being surrounded by cute girls and having Inaba-san feeding you isn't a harem, then what is?"

"...My bad, Fujishima-san."

Taichi couldn't help but to apologize, even though he didn't know why.

"But, Yaegashi-kun with Inaba-san... does Nagase-san not matter to you anymore?"

"Me?"

The name Nagase caught the attention of the Nagase look-alike, who was holding onto Taichi's hand.

Taichi crouched, withdrew his hand, and covered the Nagase look-alike's mouth.

"Mmph! Mmph?"

"Please, until I say 'Okay' don't say a word. Can you do it?"

Although puzzled, the Nagase look-alike nodded. She was really an honest and good child.

"What? What does that mean?"



"N—Nothing, it's not important."

Taichi said that, but Fujishima still gave him a surprised stare.

"This feels suspicious... But we'll put that aside for now. Well then, why are you flirting with Inaba-san just as New Year arrives? What about Nagase-san?"

"W—We are not flirting... And I have not been dating anyone..."

That's right, I have not yet dated anyone—More accurately speaking, have not dated 'either one'.

"I see, you want to hold on to this half and half situation and fully enjoy being loved, am I right? But Yaegashi-kun, men of that kind never end up well. You best be more careful."

"I—I didn't mean it like that..."

"Are you saying you didn't mean it like that, but you ended up being like that? You really are a sinful man. Should I, the 'Missionary of Love', bestow the iron fist of punishment upon you?"

"The love preacher shouldn't swing her fist around like that... And why are you being so quiet from the start, Inaba? Say something to deny it!"

"Hm? I was going to say that if I let Fujishima misinterpret this into something strange and then help spread rumors around, it could become an 'accomplished fact'."

So insidious. Inaba Himeko, you're being too insidious!

"You know we're kind of in a pinch..."

"What, I'm just kidding. Just~ Kidding~!"

Lately Taichi was finding himself unable to tell if Inaba was serious at all. What seemed like a thoroughly calculated speech didn't seem to imply anything, and appeared to be nothing more than a tease.

"But leaving that photo does seem bad."

Inaba murmured to herself, and proceeded to whisper into Fujishima's ear.

A sharp gleam sparked across Fujishima's eyes.

Fujishima operated her cell phone and showed the screen to Inaba.

After Inaba examined the screen, the two of them clasped each other's hand.

And then Inaba came back to Taichi's side as if nothing ever happened.

"What's going on... What kind of deal did you two make?"

He thought Fujishima wouldn't compromise that easily...

"Nothing important, Taichi. It's something between us girls."

"That's right, Yaegashi-kun. It's a boy-restricted secret garden for girls only. Fufufu~"

Fujishima brushed off her drool.

If he delved any further, something terrifying might come up; hence, he had better pretend he didn't see anything.

"Whatever. As long as the photo is deleted. Well then, see you later Fujishima, during the new semester——"

"——We'll just leave this at that. However..."

Fujishima pushed her glasses up.

"Those two cute young ladies with Yaegashi-kun, who are they?"

She indeed brought it up.

"Uh, they... are a relative's children."

"Yaegashi-kun's?"

"Uh, yeah I guess."

The moment Taichi answered, Inaba gave Taichi a sharp glare.

"...You moron! ...You should have said they're *their* relatives' children."

Crap, Inaba was right.

"Huh~ But this girl looks exactly like Nagase-san, the other looks exactly like Kiriyaama-san. Now that's strange."

"Looks exactly like? I am Kiriyaama—— Mmph!"

The Kiriyaama look-alike spoke, but Inaba promptly covered her mouth. Then Inaba put her arm around the young girl's body and pulled the girl towards herself. The girl struggled in Inaba's grasp, making sounds of "Mmph~ Mmph~".

Needless to say, Fujishima responded with another surprised stare towards them.

"...Why are you covering her mouth? That said, they are looking more and more like Nagase-san and Kiriyaama-san. They would look like this if they were younger..."

"Inaba-nee-chan~ I finally bought it~"

Meanwhile, the Aoki look-alike returned with his toffee apple raised up high.

"Oh? Is this a relative of Inaba-san? ...But this child... Looks shockingly like Aoki-san..."

"Crap! We'll miss the meeting time at this rate! Run, Taichi!"

Inaba shouted, and at the same time she pulled the Kiriya look-alike and sprinted forward. On her way, she carefully tried not to drop the takoyaki dish in her hand and nudged the Aoki look-alike with her elbow:

"Run quickly! If you'll be good and run, I'll buy you anything you want later!"

"Eh? Really? Hooray~ Dash!"

"Hey don't just randomly run around! Stick beside me! Gah, you idiot! You wanna get lost again?"

"Hey, hey! Wait for me!"

Taichi was half a beat slow, and turned his back on Fujishima as well. Inaba and the others were leading in the front, sprinting.

"Bear with me just a bit."

Taichi carried the Nagase look-alike and ran after Inaba.

"Whoa! So fast! So high!"

The Nagase look-alike seemed to enjoy the thrill of being carried, as she gleefully swung her body around.

"I get it, but please be good and don't move! Don't swing your cotton candy around——Ack! Whoa?"

Attacked by the cotton candy, Taichi, whose view was blocked, subsequently ran into a pedestrian.

"Ouch~~"

"Ah, s—sorry!"

"It's alright, I'm fine... Eh, strange? Onii..."

The girl, who quickly retracted her courteous smile, was...

"Onii-chan?"

——Taichi's five-years-younger sister narrowed her eyes and stared at him.

A lot had happened, so his sister was in a very bad mood.

"You... Why are you..."

Struck by unbelievably bad luck, he kept encountering trouble after trouble.

"I'm with my friends... Putting that aside, Onii-chan?"

His sister beamed with a meaningful smile. By the way, her eyes were not smiling at all.

"Who's that little girl Onii-chan is carrying? It can't be a relative's child right? It can't be someone Onii-chan knows either right? Should I be calling in the police judging by the situation?"

"What?"

The girl in Taichi's arm asked; his sister once again glared sharply at Taichi.

She really is... in a bad mood.

"I'm sorry! I will explain later, please forgive me for now!"

"O-Onii-chan!?"

Taichi ignored her sister's questioning and fled.

Taichi, fearing what kind of price he would pay for fleeing like that once he got home, barely caught up with Inaba and escaped from the crowd around the shrine.

There was no sign of Fujishima or his sister coming after them.

"Puff... puff... It was certain that we might run into people we know, we were probably too careless... too full of ourselves."

Inaba, still gasping, reflected upon her actions.

"Yeah... Probably... We should just stay put today... Hm? Message?"

Taichi opened his cell phone.

He had two new messages.

The senders were... Fujishima Maiko and his sister.

"After the new semester starts, you better let me ask you questions properly. I won't let you go until I accept your explanation, little dummy~ ♥"

That heart symbol at the end was too terrifying, Fujishima-san.

"Explain yourself. Choose what to say carefully."

Your simple and cold tone was scary, dear sister.

Taichi gloomily lowered his head, and murmured:

"Why... did it end up like this..."

"Like this~"

"This~"

"**Yui, Iori...** It's good to see you two in such high spirits..."

Taichi looked at the two girls who represented this time's event, and sighed.

Directly interacting with the younger selves of his peers was impossible—it was the sort of thing that would only occur in a world where a time machine has been invented.

Yet, the impossible occurred and was happening right now before his eyes.

This story dated back to Christmas, the day of Yamaboshi High School's graduation ceremony.

Chapter 1 - By the Time I Was Reminded, It Had Already Begun

Once there was the "Personality Exchange" phenomenon.

Once there was the "Desire Unleash" phenomenon.

The year in which they were caught by these unbelievable events was coming to a close.

It had been four months since they first encountered «Heartseed». What happened afterward was too shocking, and because of that memories regarding the first half of the year were actually becoming blurry.

Major events like the entrance exam and entering high school were dwarfed when compared to what had happened.

Now that he thought about it, it occurred to him that he used to be living a very 'ordinary' life.

Such an ordinary life, however, was instantly shattered by a sudden disaster.

What could he do to escape it while remaining 'ordinary'?

Had he not entered Yamaboshi High School.

Had he not joined the Cultural Research Club (CRC for short).

Had he not met his companions in the CRC.

Had it been that way, he probably could have lived a much more ordinary high school life.

His rankings may not have dropped either.

However...

He never regretted entering Yamaboshi High School, joining the variety club—the CRC—that was newly established this year, and meeting his companions in the club. Not even once.

Even if he was given another chance, he would have chosen the same path as he had then.

Maybe he lost something important on the way.

Nevertheless, he was given more opportunities to gain something important.

At least this was what Yaegashi Taichi believed.



When the graduation ceremony ended in the ceremonial hall, each class returned to its respective classroom for a homeroom meeting.

The one who stood on the podium in Taichi's class, class 1C, was its homeroom teacher Gotou Ryuuzen (nicknamed Go-san). He was a physics teacher characterized by his carefree and relaxed personality.

"Even though the principal and student councilor said many things, as long as you don't commit any crimes or get caught up in some weird scandal during the break, you can do whatever you like. To sum it up, don't make me come out to clean up after you!"

Frank and straightforward as always. One might as well treat this as a virtue.

"Well then, the notes are distributed too... Is there anything I missed, Fujishima-san?"

"I have no idea what the higher-ups want the teachers to relay to the students; but as far as what I can think of, that should be it."

The one who answered him was the class representative Fujishima Maiko. Gotou had been relying on her responsible and able personality a lot recently (and a lot on Inaba Himeko too).

"Oh, that reminds me, it's Christmas today. Now just because it's Christmas doesn't mean you lot can go to love hotels. High schoolers are forbidden there. By the way, even if you have to do it, do it in your own homes; and don't forget the safety measures!"

"There has been a lot of troublesome events lately. I think you'd better watch your speech; it could be easily mistaken as sexual harassment, sensei."

Fujishima seemed to have become Gotou's guardian.

"Well then, that's about it. It might be a little too early, but I shouldn't get frowned on today, right? Dismissed!"

Students became restless as soon as the order was made. Since it was the day of the graduation ceremony, the classroom was filled with a mood more fidgety than usual.

"Yo, Yaegashi, you shouldn't need to worry about what Go-san said at the end, right?"

Taichi's friend, Watase Shingo, said to him.

"You're overthinking it. Watase too, right?"

Watase had the three main qualities of a good man: athletic, handsome, and cheerful, yet he didn't have a girlfriend. That was because he was after Fujishima Maiko, who seemed to be an iron fortress in her own right. Allegedly, he had tried many methods in hopes of earning Fujishima's heart, but she seemed unfazed by any of it.

"Shut up. Never mind that, didn't you say that this winter break you were gonna hang out——"

"Hey, Taichi, we'll go ahead first, okay?"

"Taichi should hurry up too~"

"Oh, alright."

Inaba and Nagase Iori gestured towards Taichi and left the classroom.

"What's up? You guys got plans?"

"We CRC are planning to have some sort of Christmas party..."

"Ah, you guys sure get along really well. That being said though, since you are getting along so well it might be surprisingly difficult now if you want to date a certain someone in the group."

"Eh... There doesn't seem to be any need to worry about that..."

"Then why don't you hurry up and ask Nagase out already?"

"... Should I say we got caught up in a rather difficult situation..."

"You keep mentioning that. It's really beginning to look dubious."

Taichi agreed that he should make it clear too.

Although that was what he had in mind...

"Whatever, it's not for me to say anyway. You seem to be in a hurry, so I'll text you about hanging out later."

"Alright."

As Watase left their desks, Taichi stood up and proceeded to chat with his other friends. They talked about things such as plans for Christmas, plans for the New Year, what sort of day January 4 was going to be, and how holiday projects were bullshit (Taichi didn't think this way).

...And ended up being distracted for quite a bit of time.

If I don't hurry, I might upset the rest of the club. With that in mind, Taichi hurried out of the classroom.

The female students waved at him from the windows: "Yaegashi-kun, see you next year!"

In the past few months the CRC members, due to their involvement in strange situations, frequently ended up acting freakishly. Yet their classmates still genuinely looked out for them. Taichi was deeply grateful for that.

Ever since they were sucked into that abnormal world, Taichi learned how great his daily life truly was.

Suddenly——

Thump.

Someone patted on Taichi's shoulder.

Nothing wrong with that.

Just like any other day in this school, somebody patted on his shoulder as usual.

Yet...

A chill ran through Taichi's entire body.

It was not... normal.

He could sense such an atmosphere in the corridor.

It was an atmosphere with a certain definitive difference than that of this world.

He was very familiar with this kind of, as he would put it, **foul** feeling.

No...! Taichi shook his head, denying this feeling.

This place should still be normal.

While the CRC club room was indeed invaded from time to time, this place had not been tainted.

'That person,' as unpredictable as he may be, had his own principles.

The surrounding sounds of chatter were blown far away.

He didn't want to look back.

Yet, he had to face it.

Because there was no escaping it.

Taichi gulped and spun around.

Just as his ominous feeling suggested, the one who stood there was Gotou Ryuuzen——No, a short-haired tomboyish girl.

It was Ozawa Misaki from the track and field club.

Taichi was startled at the fact that it wasn't Gotou.

What's this? I must have been hallucinating.

It felt like «Heartseed's» presence for a moment, but it seemed I was mistaken...

No.

Ozawa's eyes were half-opened.

She was emitting the same sluggish aura as that person did.

Was it «Heartseed»?

But the way she looked seemed different than the usual «Heartseed».

"...Ozawa?"

Taichi asked alarmingly.

"...You... I need you to be the Knight."

Ozawa spoke slowly, which was very different from her usual swift manner.

She was abnormal.

"What... do you mean?"

"Do not tell anyone about me... Can you promise?"

Taichi was certain the speaker before him was not Ozawa.

Yet——It didn't seem to be «Heartseed» either.

"...If you break this promise, twelve to seventeen o'clock... shall become 'forever,' understand?"

"Hold on! What's that supposed to mean?"

"It will begin soon... I know that. Well then...Bye."

As soon as she finished her sentence, Ozawa's body collapsed.

"Are—Are you alright?"

Taichi rushed to Ozawa's aid.

"Ugh... Huh? Wait, what happened?"

Ozawa opened her eyes, astonished, and stood up.

"I... What happened to me? Yaegashi-kun?"

"Uh... Ozawa, you suddenly collapsed in the corridor..."

"You're kidding... Was it anemia? Hold on, was I actually in the corridor before?"

Ozawa did not seem to recall any of what just happened.

"Ah, thanks anyway, Yaegashi-kun."

Taichi nodded and Ozawa, dumbfounded, returned to her classroom.

"Just now... What was that supposed to be?"

Knight?

Do not tell anyone?

Twelve to seventeen o'clock?

Shall become 'forever'?

More importantly, that thing—the thing that possessed Ozawa, what was it?

As Taichi collected his disarrayed thoughts, he arrived at room 401 of the recreational building, the CRC club room.

Everyone but Taichi was already there.

On the table were juice and snacks, and board games too. These were prepared yesterday.

"Hey, Taichi, did you write this?"

Inaba narrowed her slender eyes and questioned Taichi. Her posture, in addition to her slim figure, radiated the qualities of a professional model.

Taichi looked towards the blackboard that Inaba was pointing at.

Inaba Himeko, Nagase Iori, Kiriama Yui, Aoki Yoshifumi

The CRC members' names were written on the board.

"Why isn't my name there? Am I supposed to write it up there myself?"

Taichi responded, and then Inaba's expression stiffened.

"You didn't write it either..."

"When we arrived, they were already written on the board... but none of us, including Taichi, recall writing any of this..."

KiriYama Yui explained as she wrapped her arms around her small body.

"Then... who wrote it?"

"If we knew, we wouldn't have asked you."

"This really is... a mysterious case!"

Aoki Yoshifumi shook his slightly long curly hair, seemingly excited.

Nagase Iori, cupping her chin in a dramatic pose, replied:

"This case... could it be a 'Guess who wrote it on the blackboard' kind of who-did-it game that somebody prepared..."

"So that's it! In other words, the message on the board is a dining message? Iori-chan. In that case the culprit must be... Taichi! That's because his name is the only one not on it!"

"It wasn't me. And your deduction is too sloppy. By the way, it's not 'dining,' it's 'dying.'"

Three apparent flaws in one sentence——The Aoki today was staying true to his Aoki style.

"If it really is a who-did-it game... then wouldn't Iori be the most suspicious since she was the first one to bring the subject up? Don't the culprits usually behave like that?"

"Y—Yui... Are you suspecting me...?"

"No! I'm just saying! I mean Iori is so cute, why would you lie to us!"

"You believe I'm innocent, Yui!"

"Of course, Iori!"

Nagase and Kiriyama hugged each other like a duo in a play. Inaba darted a look at them and then, with a serious expression, muttered:

"So someone came into club room... but what were they after...?"

"Could it be just a prank? I mean, they only wrote names on the board... though not having my name up there does kinda bother me..."

"It isn't just names, Taichi."

"Huh?"

Hearing Inaba's words, Taichi looked towards the board again to find that there was something else written besides the names.

Twelve to seventeen o'clock

"What's that? The time... Ah!"

He remembered that Ozawa mentioned a time when she was acting strange just before...

—Twelve to seventeen o'clock... shall become 'forever.'

The voice that did not belong to Ozawa rang in his head.

Taichi felt a sudden chill.

Was this a coincidence? Or was it——

The clock in the room displayed 11:50.

Should he tell everyone what happened?

But that thing told him "do not tell anyone" and "do not break the promise".

Maybe he should first observe the situation and not do anything reckless for now?

Nothing had happened yet, after all.

"If this is a prank, then it's just ridiculous... Anything go missing here?"

Inaba pointed out. They searched through the whole club room, but did not find anything out of ordinary.

"Hmm... that felt a little creepy, but let's celebrate first. We'll talk about this later."

Everyone cheered with their drinks and began the Christmas party (which was actually nothing more than eating, drinking, chatting, and playing).

"Hoowa——! Sodas are great!"

"...Iori, can you be a little more lady-like? (Gulp)... So sour! Hold on, this isn't something a human can drink, is it?"

"Don't stand when you're eating, Yui. Turns out I'm the most lady-like here now am I?"

"Inaba-chan, Inaba-chan, ladies don't lean on their elbows on the table; it's like one of those forty-year-old white collars at the bar with an old man's drinking gesture... OUCH!"

"I kept my back straight; in no way do I look like a middle-aged old man!"

The four of them bickered.

Taichi, on the other hand, was checking the time while holding his paper cup near his mouth.

"Why are you looking at the time so much, Taichi? The party just started!"

Nagase said half-jokingly, peeking at Taichi.

Having the face of the rumored 'cutest girl of the class year' closing in on him like that, Taichi couldn't help but feel a spike in his heart rate.

"Oh, it's nothing..."

Taichi casually glossed it over while looking at the clock again.

The time was about to hit twelve o'clock.

Just as Taichi thought nothing would happen——

"Ugh...!"

The air suddenly changed.

Nagase moaned and abruptly put down the paper cup she was holding.

"Na— Nagase?"

"My... body's burning up..."

Nagase's expression changed drastically, and her entire body quivered uncontrollably.

"You okay?"

Taichi inquired, but Nagase was not in any condition to answer.

"Eh... Whoa... Me too..."

Kiriyama made a hoarse sound. She painfully grasped onto her chestnut-brown long hair.

"Oi, what's going on?!"

"Yui and Iori-chan, are you two alright?!"

Inaba and Aoki both asked as they noticed something was wrong.

Twelve to seventeen o'clock.

The message on the blackboard.

Paranormal changes.

The one who wasn't «Heartseed».

Twelve o'clock was the mark of a certain beginning—Just as that thought flashed across Taichi's mind...

Nagase and Kiriyama vanished from this world.

"What the—?!"

Taichi shrieked all of the sudden.

He rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

Upon closer look, they did not exactly vanish without a trace.

Where Nagase and Kiriyama were sitting just before were now two adorable little girls, each covered in an over-sized YBH uniform.

"What... Wait... Who... They?"

Inaba asked, utterly confused.

"The real question is... Where are Nagase and Kiriyama?"

Taichi remarked after Inaba.

The black hair girl and the chestnut-brown hair girl looked around.

"Wooo~ my clothes are so big~"

The black hair girl said while swinging her over-length sleeves about.

"Mine too!"

The chestnut-brown hair girl said and rolled up her sleeves. Then, she proceeded to help the younger girl next to her to do the same.

"Oh, snacks! May I pick the ones I like?"

The chestnut-hue hair girl asked.

Taichi and the remaining others, still speechless, nodded. The little girl cheered and picked up two biscuits.

Then, she gave one to the black hair girl.

"Would you like some? Here."

"Thank you~"

The two girls began eating together like best friends.

Taichi and Aoki, who was right next to him, unconsciously looked at each other. Then they grabbed each other's shoulders.

"Wha— wha— wha— what is this?! What's going on?! Am I getting hallucinations of myself swapping bodies?!"

Aoki exclaimed, his eyes stretching wide from bewilderment.

"How am I supposed to know?! Don't ask me! There must be something wrong with my eyes!"

"Something with the eyes... Ah... That must be it! Okay, let's close our eyes. One... two... three... ready. Once we open our eyes everything will be back to normal... Why is it still the same?!"

"Who are these children?! Where are their parents?! The mother of these children, please come and take them home!"

Taichi yelled in panic. Suddenly, Inaba started laughing dryly and stood up from her seat.

Then, she opened the window... and screamed with everything from the bottom of her lungs:

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON—————?!"

Inaba's voice echoed through the schoolyard.

After that scream, Inaba seemed to have cooled down and led the remaining others to examine their current situation.

Judging by the current outcome and casting aside any thoughts of "This is impossible!", they deduced that Nagase Iori and Kiriya Yui had reverted back to their child selves.

The two girls who suddenly appeared in the CRC room were the result of reverting Nagase and Kiriya. Nagase was around her first year in grade school, while Kiriya was in her fifth.

Nagase and Kiriya not only became miniature, but their face also became round and child-like. Their hair style, however, remained the same.

Also, they both appeared directly at the spot where the first year high school versions of Nagase and Kiriya were previously. The two were right before Taichi's group's eyes. It was hard to imagine how the two could manage to hide themselves somewhere and switch places with the children.

In addition to that, the clothes miniature Nagase and Kiriya were wearing were the exact same clothes worn by the originals. Everything, including items in the pockets, was the same. So there was no doubt about it.

It should also be noted that as they were examining the clothes, mini-Nagase stood up and her skirt and underwear almost fell off, which made her panic. Inaba swiftly attacked Taichi's and Aoki's eyes. While the two were groaning in pain, she immediately implemented measures to stop Nagase's clothes from falling off.

Finally, the key evidence was the words from the girls involved.

Wrapped in loose clothing (the skirts looked like gowns on them), the two girls sat side by side. Across from them sat Aoki, Inaba and Taichi.

"Ahem." Inaba cleared her throat.

"Let me verify once more... What are your names and ages? Start with the one who's older."

"Yes! Kiriyaama Yui, eleven years old!"

The highly energetic Kiriyaama(11) answered cheerfully. She looked to be a lot more competitive compared to the present Yui, and seemed like the healthy type of girl that would run off even in the cold winter.

"Well then, this child over here?"

"Nagase Iori, six years old!"

Nagase(6) answered cheerfully too. The hairband that fell off during the reversal(?) was tied back to her hair again. Hence, she looked just like a shrunken version of Nagase.

"Next question then. Who is this lanky, dirty onii-chan?"

"Aoki-san!"

"Aoki Onii-chan!"

"The 'dirty' part was not necessary, Inaba-chan!"

"Who is this handsome onii-chan over here?"

"Taichi-san!"

"Taichi Onii-chan!"

"So... So I get a compliment for my introduction, Inaba-san...?"

Taichi was certain that he was going to be criticized.

How should he put it? He was not used to being complimented, so he was not sure how to react towards this unexpected outcome.

"Well then, who am I?"

"Inaba-san!"

"Inaba Onee-chan!"

"OK. Now, for the two of you... what are we?"

"Eh... Inaba-san is Inaba-san... Aoki-san is Aoki-san, Taichi-san is Taichi-san. What else could it be?"

"Onii-chan and Onee-chan are Onii-chan and Onee-chan?"

"...I see. Then do you remember anything you did yesterday?"

"I think I first went to school, then the dojo... but it's kinda hazy, so I'm not quite sure."

"I went to school too, and played with my friends!"

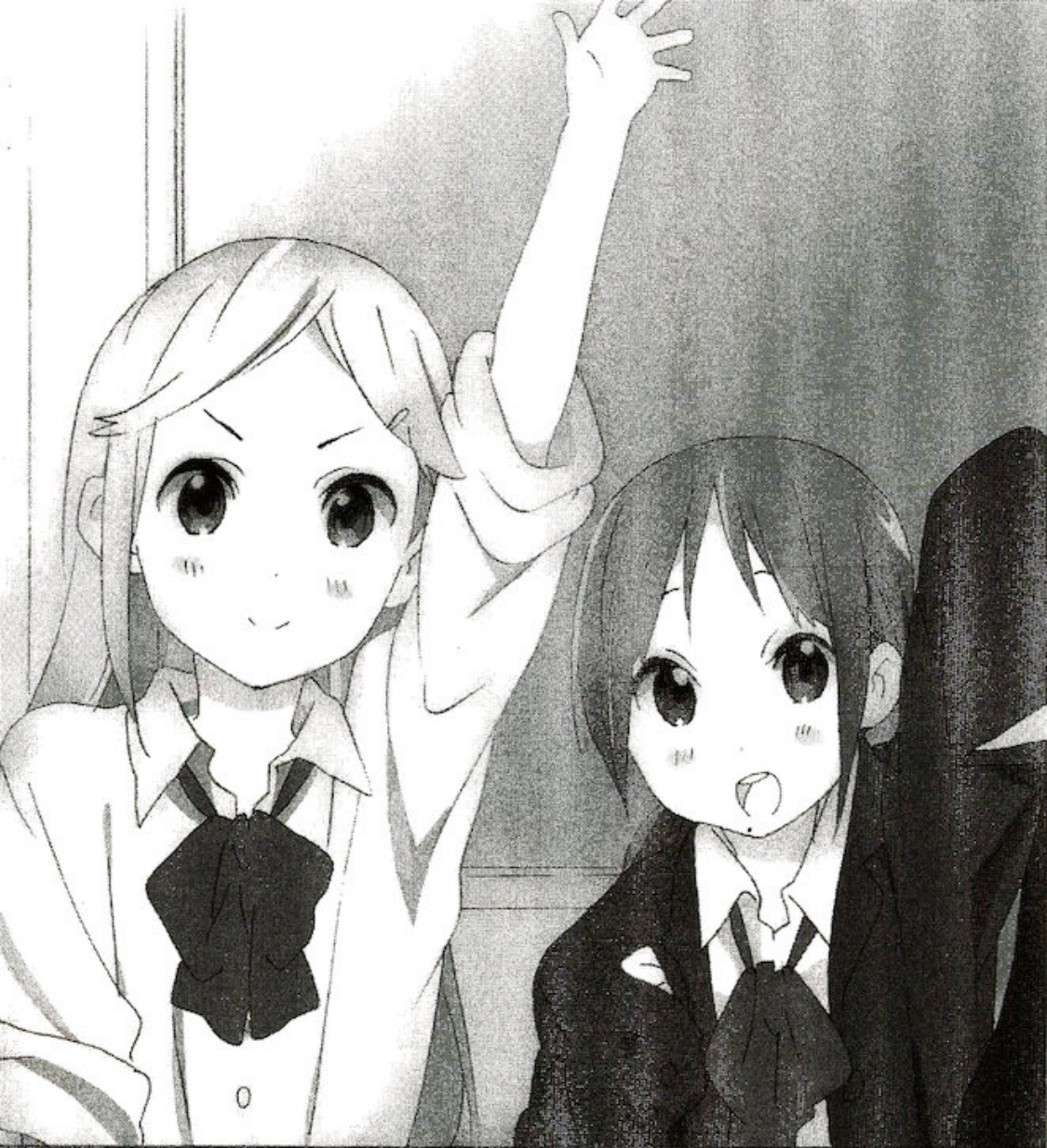
"The next question is for Yui... Do you remember your weekly schedule?"

Inaba gave KiriYama(11) some pen and paper.

"The second semester right? If I only need to make a rough list..."

Even though KiriYama(11) was hesitant on some details, occasionally making sounds of "Hmmp~", she managed to write down her schedule.

"Okay, I finished, I think that's it."



Inaba operated her cell phone and compared KiriYama(11)'s paper with the version she obtained via several layers of social networking: a photo from those who 'possess copies of KiriYama's schedule during fifth grade'. (Some people sure knew how to store things well.)

"...All correct... Why don't you two go play for a little?"

"Alright. Let's play, Iori-chan?"

"Let's play! I wanna play this!"

"Oh! You know how to play reversi?"

"Yep!"

The two girls were enjoying themselves like a pair of loving siblings.

Inaba watched over the happy girls with a serious expression, and spoke:

"If we reorganize these pieces of information..."

Nagase and KiriYama were reverted in time, and both their body and mind were back to their younger age.

They seemed to be able to recognize their surroundings pretty well. They didn't question their situation, as if it was meant to be from the start. But when asked with questions like "Why are you here?" they couldn't seem to answer clearly.

When the two were reverted, they had some of their memory from that age (mostly fragments of memories though. Considering that they suddenly appeared here as a presence of 'this moment' due to a supernatural phenomenon, it was only logical).

"——And there you have it... The hell with 'there you have it'! This makes no sense!"

Inaba jabbed at her own remark. She seemed extremely shaken.

Based on their observations, if Taichi and the others only knew about the 'normal' world, they would probably never believe it. In fact, they may not even be observing to begin with.

If they were 'normal,' and took the 'normal' approach, while they would feel strange, they would simply bring the children to the staff office or the police, then proceed to search for the missing Nagase and Kiriya.

But they did not take such a 'normal' approach.

Because they knew about that other world.

Because they knew about such an abnormality that would do all kinds of things to reach them.

Because they knew... that they must deal with that abnormality.

"This is really bad."

Aoki said. Inaba murmured by his side:

"This could be reconstruction of the human body at a cellular... No, this might even be at a molecular level... including the mind and memory... and the change appears to be tuned naturally... swapping between a person from the past and present... Something like that... Maybe."

"These two girls... What kind of presence are they?"

Taichi peeked at the child versions of his peers.

"What kind of presence? I doubt I can answer that... because they aren't supposed to show up here at all."

Rather than how it happened, one should say that the two children shouldn't exist here at all.

"If that's the case... Where are the original Yui and Iori-chan now?"

"... They could be existing somewhere... or they could be not existing at all. If we think of them as the result of a complete transformation... Something like that. Wait a minute."

Inaba seemed to have caught onto something. Then she raised her eye brow.

"This may sound inauspicious... But just to consider one extreme of the scale, suppose our younger versions of Iori and Yui die in a car accident... If that comes true... What will happen?"

"We'd then have ourselves a pair of human corpses that aren't supposed to exist... Give me a break, I don't want to know! We should say... Actually no. We should presume that...the two of them will return to normal sooner or later... right?"

Inaba closed her eyes and nodded at Taichi's word.

"They should... **Hopefully**. Based on what we've experienced anyway, is that right?"

The root of this situation...

The one who can create such a situation...

"...That's if this is «Heartseed»'s doing."

Aoki spoke the name of the mastermind who brought Taichi and the rest of the CRC into this abnormal situation.

No matter how ridiculous the situation could get, they had the feeling that "If he's involved, anything can happen."

"After three times... anyone would start getting used to it. This is bullshit!"

Inaba swore. Taichi began:

"But I——"

This noon, he...

"Hm? Don't just stop at halfway will you?"

Inaba stared into Taichi's eye closely.

The Ozawa **that was possessed by someone.**

The enforced promise.

Even without much of a forceful demeanor, he felt the immense pressure exerted on him. He could even say the presence was at a level beyond that of this world.

And it seemed that he was the only one who was contacted.

In the end, after putting all the information together, Taichi looked away from Inaba.

"No... nothing... It was nothing."

What sort of being was that thing? How was «Heartseed» related to this?

What sort of phenomenon was this? Taichi knew nothing.

That one-sided promise may have a significant meaning.

At least before he had more information, he should hold on.

"What? If you notice anything weird, say it, okay?"

Taichi could only nod dubiously at Inaba's words.

"Say, if this is «Heartseed's» doing... Does that mean we would turn into 'this' too?"

Aoki said half-jokingly, but failed to hide his anxiety.

Based on the past two phenomena...

"It will... most likely, at random, revert some of us back to kids..."

"Wait! Wait! Wait! Hold on a second!"

Taichi's murmuring stirred Inaba greatly.

"Why are you in such a flurry, Inaba?"

"Random... In that case, what happens if this occurs on the street?"

"If someone turns into a little kid on the streets... Yelp!"

As Taichi caught onto what Inaba was thinking, his face immediately paled.

"A physical change... is visible to the naked eyes."

Inaba's voice was trembling in fear.

"Doesn't that mean... we won't even be able to step outside?"

Unable to step outside—it took Taichi a while to grasp the meaning of this simple remark.

"Eh... What? Ehhhh?! No, but...really... You're right... Ahhh!"

Aoki held his head and opened his mouth wide in horror.

Was there anything *those beings* couldn't do?

"Uh~ Uh~"

Kiriyama(11) suddenly came towards Inaba and yanked at her uniform, with Nagase(6) by her side.

"W—What's up?"

"Iori-chan says she wants to use the bathroom, I'll watch her. I've been taking good care of her!"

Kiriyama(11) seemed pleased with herself.

"Alright, let's go!"

"Okay~"

The two held hands and happily headed for the door.

"Wait, wait, waaaaiiiit a second you dummies!"

Inaba blocked their path with a stern expression.

"Eh? Why?"

Kiriyama(11) asked with her head slanted in confusion.

"I can't let you go outside!"

"Huh... but..."

"I'm gonna pee~"

Nagase(6) started crossing her legs.

"W—What you mean you're gonna pee! Don't talk like that!"

"Inaba... She's just a child..."

It was obviously nothing of importance, but Taichi still had to point it out.

"Then I'll go by myself~"

"Whether you go by yourself or not isn't the problem; having a grade-schooler walk around the campus in an over-sized uniform is!"

"Pee... I'm gonna pee..."

Nagase(6)'s eyes became teary.

"Gah—— Damn it, okay I get it! Taichi, Aoki! You go out there and secure the hallway between here and the bathroom! Keep a close eye on them. We absolutely must not let anyone see them! I'll take over once we get inside the bathroom!"

Nagase(6)'s bathroom dilemma became so alarming that one could describe it as the frontlines of a battlefield.

Operation bathroom infiltration success.

After that, Taichi and the remaining others could only anxiously wait for the time to pass.

They were unsure of when they would end up like Nagase and Kiriya.

They tried to prepare countermeasures, but failed to make any progress due to the overwhelming number of uncertain factors.

On the other hand, Nagase(6) and Kiriya(11) were happily taking their freedom with snacks and games.

The remaining three watched over Nagase and Kiriya, hoping that they would return to normal. But nothing happened, and the sky had turned dark outside.

"They aren't going to stay that way forever... right?"

Neither Nagase and Kiriya showed any sign of returning to normal, and since it had been quite a long time, Inaba began to worry.

"I hope not... That would be too much to bear."

A person's entire history had been suddenly turned upside down, how could anyone take that?

"Oh! It's almost five now. Finally..." Aoki said.

Based on what they had gathered, this hour was their only thread of 'hope'.

Taichi looked towards the clock on the wall; its hand was about to hit 'twelve'.

Then he looked back towards the writing on the blackboard.

Twelve to seventeen o'clock.

——Could this mean the phenomenon only occurs 'from twelve to seventeen o'clock'?

The time written on the board left them such an abrupt impression that it led to many questions.

Then there was the fact that Nagase(6) and Kiriyaama(11) both appeared at twelve o'clock.

It was a weak conclusion based on only two facts.

Yet, the three of them had a feeling that "it might be it".

And then to Taichi, the fact that he was told of 'twelve to seventeen o'clock' made him even more certain of it.

Taichi had not yet mentioned anything about the encounter with the possessed Ozawa to Inaba and Aoki.

To be honest, he felt he had missed his chance to speak up.

"Ah, it's five," Aoki said.

After a short pause, in the next moment——

"Ungh..."

"Augh..."

Nagase(6) and Kiriyaama(11), who were playing cards at the time, held their arms around themselves.

Then, in the succeeding moment——

There stood Nagase Iori and Kiriyaama Yui, who were returned to normal.

Taichi was petrified from shock.

He was certain that he had been watching the two tightly and had never diverted his eyes. Maybe he had blinked, but even then it was only a blink of the eye.

Even so, Taichi could not tell how the two returned to normal.

When he noticed, Nagase and Kiriyaama were standing there as if they were already there to begin with.

"Th—They changed back?"

Aoki jumped up and exclaimed, while Inaba was at a loss.

"Huh... This time... is like this. What was that... magic? Is that even possible? It doesn't matter, does it... Of course it does! I refuse to accept this!"

"Umm... Eh... How did I get here?"

Kiriyaama, who just returned to normal, felt confused. Nagase shook her head as well.

"That was strange... What happened? Say, why does my belly feel so tight? Who—Whoa!? How did my underwear end up like this?"

Nagase began fixing her clothing.

"Oi, Nagase! We boys are here too! Don't lift your skirt like——" "Ahhh Iori-chan——"

"Then why don't you two have some self-respect and avert your eyes?!"

Inaba threw a punch at Taichi between the eyes, who collapsed backwards along with his chair (she threw one at Aoki as well).

"Do you two... remember anything that happened just now?"

Inaba inquired, and the two expressed their surprise.

"Just now... What... You mean...?"

Kiriyama questioned.

"Why is it so dark outside?! What time is it... five o'clock?!"

Nagase stood up, shocked.

"Five o'clock? Huh? Wha—How?! Wasn't it noon just now?!"

They didn't seem to have retained any memory while they were turned into children(?).

Hence, Inaba filled the two in on what happened.

The two initially expressed "You're kidding" and did not quite believe her words, but after some serious explanation from everyone else, their expressions changed.

"I... I became eleven..."

"And I became six..."

Inaba sighed and scratched her head.

"Yea... At least that's what you... No, I mean, that's what the children that were just here insisted... You seemed to have transformed into your 'past selves', or you could have been swapped with your 'past selves'... But based on what we saw, the physical transformation theory seems to make more sense... Even though they both make zero sense!"

"Wait a minute!"

Kiriyama began touching her own face and body.

"If—If I had become a child, then my body must have shrunk too, right? If I shrunk, where did all the extra muscle and hair go? The real question is, what? Can my body even handle that kind of crazy change?"

"Don't ask me... I don't even want to think about it."

"Ahaha... I can only laugh right now... But I... really don't remember anything from the past several hours..."

Nagase wanted to treat it as a joke, but the stiff smile on her face said otherwise.

"Are your bodies... Do you two feel alright?"

Taichi asked about what he was most concerned about.

"Hm... I seem fine."

Nagase paused, and tilted her head with a hesitant expression.

"Uh... But... Something is odd."

"What? If you feel anything odd you have to tell us."

"Hmm... Is it because you guys told me that I had become six years old? ...My childhood memories feel really fresh in my head. Things that occurred when I was in first-grade... I usually can't recall any of those."

"Now that you mention it, it seems to be the same for me too... Whoa... Now that I've realized it... Ah~ This feeling is nostalgic and kind of embarrassing too..."

"...So your past memories are evoked, huh?"

Inaba murmured, and proceeded:

"So... rather than saying 'you had swapped with your past selves', it would be more accurate to say 'you had physically transformed'? Theoretically speaking, if it was 'swapping with the past selves', it wouldn't have left anything behind."

As usual, Inaba analyzed the situation solely with the information she had.

"What about now? Do you still not remember anything from during the change?"

Nagase made a 'hmm' sound and entered deep thought.

"...I still don't... remember anything. I do remember other things from my past though: playing with friends, doing homework, and... things about my family."

When she mentioned her family, Nagase's tone shifted slightly.

Nagase was six years old when she met her second 'new' father.

"Everything that I recall are things from way back then... Ah... I think I sorta became aware of my feelings back then too... This feels awkward," Nagase said somberly.

Kiryama continued:

"I have the same feeling as Iori... While I still find it hard to believe that I don't remember anything about my change... Things I did when I was a fifth grader... Should I say 'distinct'? ...I don't know how to say it, but I feel my chest wrenching..."

"Stop just a moment, you two."

Catching onto their grim shift in mood, Inaba interrupted the two.

"Do you think we're going to find any clues by digging into those details?"

The two gave the question a brief thought and shook their heads.

"Then why don't we put them aside for now. We've got more important things to think about." Inaba asserted.

Her considerations probably weren't just limited to the rational level of the problem. It was also on the emotional level. Inaba may be blunt at times, but she had always taken attentive note of the others' delicate states of mind.

"Even though I'm saying that, I have no clue what to do!"

Inaba seemed rather unsure of today's events.

"So, is it safe to say that——"

Aoki said awkwardly.

"——it has begun?"

He did not specify 'what' has begun.

Inaba stood up and tapped the blackboard.

"The time written up here... Should we think of it as the time of occurrence for this phenomenon? Once reverted to a child, that person will remain a child for the entire course of the time. That, or somebody else may be randomly reverted during that time ... Also, the meaning behind leaving out Taichi's name... Anyway——"

Inaba muttered and then looked back towards Taichi and the rest.

"We can say that this is «Heartseed's» doing."

She brought up the culprit's name once again.

"——So this time we're getting 'Time Regression' huh?"

Inaba finished and became silent.

Only the sound of air ventilation could be heard in the room.

Finally realizing the stale atmosphere, a nauseous feeling rushed through the CRC members' stomach.

Images of those unreasonable experiences flashed through their mind.

Every piece of those memories felt heavy, like boulders tied to their shoulders.

"Ahh... I can't take this anymore. But I have only heard it from you, it just doesn't feel real to me..."

Nagase leaned her face flat against the table and complained. Kiriya continued,

"Again... again... again... Ugh."

"This is the third... If there's two then there'll be a third... right?"

To Aoki's remark, Inaba responded,

"If it does end at three times, that is... I must be out of my mind to think that."

It happened once, twice, and now thrice. Then... and thereafter...

It may still seem 'abnormal' at the moment, but one day it may become 'normal' to them. Taichi shuddered at this brief but dreadful thought.

No one said anything, and the time slowly ticked away.

Minutes had passed——Nagase was the first to break the silence.

"Let's... work together!"

She sounded very cheerful, enough to cause everyone to lift their heads.

"...We have... each others' back!"

Aoki echoed after her with an even more cheerful tone.

"I'm having trouble believing what's going on... But I'll do my best."

Kiriyama, whose expression was stiff before, tightened her fist.

"True, there's no point worrying now..."

Inaba smiled wryly and agreed.

They forcibly drove away any clouds of doubt they might've had.

Everyone was worried, but they would move forward together.

The CRC had become stronger.

They were strong enough to resist any incoming disaster.

Everyone focused on Taichi.

"Oh... Er... F—Fight!"

The other four dropped their heads in disappointment.

"C'mon~ We gave you the spotlight at the end. You could at least try to finish it with something inspiring!"

Nagase puffed her cheeks and booed.

"Oh well... This is expected from Taichi. It wasn't so bad after all."

Inaba gave a tired look.

"The real question is what should we do next... Hey, do you think it's alright for us to go home now?"

That suggestion didn't sound like something that would come from Inaba, who would normally avoid any unnecessary risks.

"Is it really going to be all right, Inaba-chan? What if *that* happens again? We'd be in big trouble!" Aoki asked.

"Iori's and Yui's 'Time Regression' occurred exactly from noon till five in the afternoon, sharp. And then there are those writings on the board... Based on these two clues, 'Time Regression' should only occur between twelve and seventeen o'clock. That's how I see it."

"But... don't you think we are drawing conclusions too early?"

This time it was Nagase who spoke.

"True. But that guy... at least before he shows up to explain, he wouldn't let this situation come to a 'surprising end'."

«Heartseed» would take a certain amount of time to 'observe' CRC's resistance in hopes of finding something 'interesting'.

This was something they were certain about.

"I see... I suppose you're right. If it's that serious, he would at least explain it to us."

"Yeah. In extreme cases, if it does end up ugly... he would have shown up already."

Inaba paused as everyone else held their breath.

Several seconds passed, nothing out of the ordinary happened.

"——Judging by that, there shouldn't be any problems then. The notice on the board must have been a heads up for us, right?"

Inaba said and threw her fist against the board.

"This is annoying... It's as if we're putting our faith in him..."

Kiryama muttered with mixed feelings.

"At least until he comes over to explain, it shouldn't end up with anything disastrous... That should be it... maybe... I can only say 'maybe'."

Inaba lowered her voice at the end.

"I trust Inaban."

Nagase said confidently.

"Me too."

"Me too."

"...Me too."

Kiriyama, Aoki and Taichi followed suit.

"Feels weird to be unconditionally trusted like this... However, if you are willing to... then please trust me."

——In the end, despite all the hesitations, Taichi was unable to speak out his concern.

The very factor that would overthrow their theory——**with the assumption of who the mastermind was**——may not be «Heartseed».

After Taichi and the group decided that they would meet the next day at Inaba's house, they parted on their way home.

When he was alone, Taichi began organizing his thoughts.

Nagase and Kiriyama were reverted to children.

Taichi had long given up the thought of "that's not possible". That would be a waste of time.

It had already happened, so he could only accept it as such.

The important thing was what to do next.

Taichi had no doubts about Inaba's theory. Thinking that the 'Time Regression' might happen to him at any minute, however, made him extremely nervous.

Taichi had other concerns besides the phenomenon itself.

The writings on the blackboard excluded his name.

The one who only contacted Taichi.

He kept feeling that even though the situation this time seemed the same as before, something was different.

Not to mention: Would something significant happen to him?

Just as he was brainstorming, Taichi arrived home safely.

He let out a white breath under the darkened sky and relaxed his body a little.

Of course, he wouldn't let down his guard just because he was home, but at least he didn't need to be as uptight as he was outside.

For him, home was the place where he could be at ease.

"I'm home."

As soon as he opened the front door, he could hear light footsteps coming from the other end of the corridor.

"Onii-chan, you're so late~ Didn't you say you were gonna arrive home early?"

His sister's innocent eyes stared at Taichi with some trace of anger.

She seemed to be helping with housework, as her slightly curly hair was tied to the back of her head.

"S—Sorry. I had something important to do."

"Something more important than your cute little sister. Oh~"

She was being somewhat difficult.

"It's Christmas after all! Onii-chan has a girlfriend too. I guess he does have something important to do~"

"I said I do not have a girlfriend!"

"Eh? Wasn't there a girl before that felt pretty nice together with Onii-chan? You still aren't dating yet? You should just go for it, Onii-chan is such a child."

"Onii-chan does not agree with that 'try it out first' kind of practice!"

Never would he have thought that he would be called a 'child' by his five-year-younger sister...

"Don't tell me you haven't given her a present yet. It's Christmas after all."

"Er... I haven't."

Who was he going to give a present to? He couldn't just give one to both of them.

"Ahh~ That's not right. In that case, since you haven't given anything to a girl, why don't you give me something as a substitute, Onii-chan?"

"Alright I get it... Hey, wait a minute. What kind of weird theory was that? Don't you think it's weird?"

Taichi recently had this vision of his sister's impish nature in the future... No no. No way. His sister should be as pure as an angel at all times.

His sister began walking back towards the corridor. Taichi took off his shoes and followed suit.

His sister spun around and faced Taichi.

"Oi, why did you stop so sudden——"

Taichi gasped as he stared into his sister's face.

Her eyes were lifeless and hollow.

Taichi knew it was abnormal.

This place isn't the same.

This mustn't be allowed.

This shouldn't be happening.

You can't intrude here.

Taichi refused to believe it. Words flew through his mind like an endless mantra.

Even so, nothing changed before his eyes.

"...Who are you?"

Only the CRC was supposed to be involved in the phenomena.

Only they were caught in the paranormal world. Everything else around them should have remained the same.

For Taichi, this was the safe zone.

His sister should not be involved.

"Who am I... who am I... who am I?"

The entity that possessed his sister tilted its head, seemingly confused.

"You're not «Heartseed», are you?"

"Not... «Heartseed»? I am «Heartseed» too..."

That voice had a slow kind of unique rhythm to it, and sounded kind of airy.

This was not how his sister spoke. Taichi never once heard his sister speak like that.

"What's going on? Are you «Heartseed»? You don't sound nor feel like him, right? Or are you telling me that «Heartseed» is not really a name but rather..."

Ah. I'm talking to that 'certain something' like it was nothing.

His sister's being involved, yet he didn't scream nor run away... He merely accepted it as a part of reality.

It was abnormal.

Including himself, things were becoming too abnormal.

"Ahh... I see."

That being seemed to have understood and hence nodded.

"In that case... I am «Heartseed's»... next... you might as well call me «Number Two». I am «Number Two», do you understand?"

"«Number Two»... That's your name?"

"Correct... Can it be?"

"Er... There's no point asking me."

What? Could it be that these 'things' don't have names to begin with?

He seemed to be familiar with «Heartseed» though...

"You were the one who possessed Ozawa during the day... Am I correct?"

Taichi first wanted to confirm this.

"Correct. We have met during the daytime. It is progressing smoothly right now... Tomorrow, again."

"Wait, you said tomorrow——"

"Same as today. At twelve o'clock some of the four will be reverted to children. At seventeen o'clock they return to normal."

"That phenomenon... was your doing?"

"...Yes."

«Heartseed» did not trigger the phenomenon.

A situation that was same as before but, at the same time, definitively different had started its wheels.

Taichi suppressed his quivering body and inquired about his primary concern.

"Only four you say... Was I excluded?"

"...It will be troublesome if all five were reverted to children. Worst case scenario... ...will be unable to continue."

He may be right about that.

"Why... only me?"

"Why... why... why? No reason."

Was this a coincidence? Then again if he's the same kind of entity as «Heartseed», it would make sense.

Before Taichi could ask another question, «Number Two» in Taichi's sister's body spoke.

"You must keep everyone from trouble. Once it begins... You are on your own. Good luck. I... will be observing. I have a good feeling about this."

The other party would not intervene. Taichi and his group must deal with it themselves, hence Taichi was designated as the 'unchanging variable'... Something like that. And like 'that person,' this one wanted to 'observe'.

The one thing in common between «Number Two» and «Heartseed» was that they were both very vague, and Taichi needed to fill in the blanks with his own imagination.

"Also, do not mention me to anyone. This is very important. You must keep this promise. If you break it... I will make the situation very troublesome."

What did he mean by troublesome?

"...What are you after? Where is «Heartseed»? How are you related to him?"

Taichi asked with every question that he could think of.

«Number Two», still expressionless, blinked briefly.

"...«Heartseed» seems to think your group is interesting. But I think «Heartseed's» relationship with your group is far more interesting. Or I should say, peculiar."

"So in the end... What are you trying to achieve?"

"...What would it be?"

"You don't know it yourself...?"

Taichi and the others didn't understand the meaning behind it all, but «Heartseed» seemed to have a specific goal in mind.

Hold on, that would mean...

"How long... will this phenomenon last?"

«Number Two» stiffened for a few seconds.

"Until I have found my answer."

For a moment, Taichi felt he was about to black out.

When would this entire ordeal without even a destination truly end?

"...Bye."

"Bye?"

Just as Taichi was caught off guard by the sudden words of departure——

"...Huh? Why am I face to face with Onii-chan?"

The abnormal atmosphere vanished without a trace.

"Hey— Wait a sec——!"

It was only a wishful thinking.

"Hm? What's wrong, Onii-chan?"

"...It was nothing."

"Oh, is that so?"

Taichi watched as his sister walked back to the living room, his back drenched in cold sweat.

«Heartseed» was an unreasonable entity.

Yet, as unreasonable as he may be, «Heartseed» had his own set of principles.

But there was no guarantee that «Number Two» would follow the same principles.

They had no limit in terms of what they could do.

Taichi knew it far too well: 'They' have the power to easily kill everyone.

«Heartseed» didn't seem to have any killing intent.

But what about «Number Two»?

Did «Number Two» plan to appear before Taichi only?

Was that «Number Two's» method? Or was there any specific meaning behind it?

What measures should Taichi take?

+ + +

"...Did I really... turn into a child?"

That night, Nagase Iori made a phone call to Inaba Himeko.

"Yeah... You really did turn into a child... I think."

"R—Really... Then——"

"What's wrong?"

"Well... Seeing the past me... Would Taichi dislike me?"

"...He's not that kind of guy, is he? I think."

"I—I guess so... I think."

"Y—Yeah... *I think.*"

"Hm... Huh"

"... *Hah, kukuku!*"

"Pff... Ahahahaha!"

"Teehahaha, what is this 'Girl's Talk'? The fact that we're talking about this was funny enough, and we like the same guy too! This is like a joke. Don't you agree?"

"I know right. I never would have dreamt that I would be talking to Inaban about this kind of stuff."

"I'm a girl too, you know. I have my fantasies too... Say, don't you think our current relationship is kind of interesting? Why don't we try letting Taichi two-time?"

"Oh, that's a fascinating idea! I hope you're not trying to make me let my guard down while aiming for a chance for yourself though, are you?"

"*Auu!*"

"I didn't know Inaban was the type to say '*Auu!*'"

"...Er, sorry, my reaction was just too weird. I can't quite grasp it myself either. Please forget it..."

"Ah, I'd really love to see Inaban's embarrassed face now!"

Nagase tried her best to talk lively and cheerfully.

Even just a little, she wanted to keep herself from giving in to that 'unreality'.

Chapter 2 - Things that Happened in the Past

The next day, Taichi left home early.

He could not afford to arrive any later than twelve o'clock.

He was immune to the phenomenon (although not confirmed yet), but should everyone else turn into a child at the same time like «Number Two» said, it would prove disastrous.

«Number Two»... How much of what he said could be trusted?

While he didn't seem to be lying, there was no real way to tell.

But one thing Taichi could be certain of was that 'Time Regression' didn't occur after 5PM yesterday.

To verify that, everyone in the CRC contacted each other in the morning. Based on what everyone said, 'nothing out of the ordinary' happened.

"Did I come too early...?"

It was eleven o'clock. Taichi had already arrived at the train station near Inaba's house.

...Yes, they were going to meet at Inaba's house.

Taichi could not help but feel very conscious of his visit to the house of the girl who had feelings for him.

He loved Nagase, and he said so. But he might have been loving her more because 'Nagase loves him'... His feelings might have been somewhat influenced by that.

If he added 'Inaba loves him too' to the equation...

Sometimes Taichi thought that he should just make it clear that he preferred Nagase.

Yet he didn't want to tread on Inaba's feelings.

Since they did not ask Taichi for an immediate response, he had been indecisive and never gave a final answer.

Taichi knew he should not drag on like this, but——

As he exited the station gate, Taichi's contemplation was interrupted by the sight of a familiar chestnut-hued hair.

"Kiryama."

"Oh, good morning Taichi."

Kiryama waved at Taichi. She was wearing a thick, cream colored duffel coat and was carrying a large shopping bag in her hand.

"Aren't you too early?"

"Right back at you."

Kiryama smiled lightly. She seemed a little tired.

"...It didn't happen to you again, right? 'Time Regression'."

"Umm... I don't think so... I was worried about whether it would go wrong, but our prediction seems to be accurate so far. I'm saying that, but I've never actually seen the phenomenon myself..."

"I guess you're right... Did you find anything else strange?" Taichi inquired.

There might be the chance that Kiriya ran into a peculiar situation like Taichi did.

An extreme situation...such as the existence of a «Number Three».

"Not... that I can think of... Yawn~"

"You didn't sleep well?"

"I went to bed late... I was nervous and..."

Kiriya stopped short and curled her chestnut-hued hair around her finger.

Taichi believed Kiriya to be the sensitive type of girl. Based on past experience, she was very vulnerable to these phenomena. Taichi thought that he should take care not to hurt her feelings.

"...I thought about things from back then."

"Things from back then... I see."

"When I got home, my mind was in chaos. All sorts of stuff... I mean, when you recall them, you get all these sorts of feelings, don't you think? It's... too complicated for words."

"Hm... Too complicated for words you say... But if you don't tell me the specifics, it's really difficult to understand."

"Um... That's why I said it's... too complicated for words... No!"

Kiriya waved her hands in denial.

"Say, Taichi. If you compare yourself now with yourself back then, how do you feel?"

"How am I gonna answer that? ...I feel like I was a brat... too complicated for words... Ah."

"You said 'too complicated for words'. Game over!"

"Crap... What kind of game was that anyway?"

"Feels kinda dumb, doesn't it?"

They both smiled wryly.

"Yeah... But these are the kind of feelings that are too complicated for words."

Kiriyama murmured. He could sense the sorrow in her voice.

"Let's put that aside for now. Taichi, what do we do now? We might inconvenience Inaba if we visit her right now."

"I thought so too... Why don't we just walk around to kill some time?"

They could not think of a good place to spend the time, so they decided to just take a casual walk.

It was not snowing nor was it windy today, so it wasn't cold to the point where people would need to take refuge in their rooms.

"Ah, this place nearby..."

Just as the two were about to head to Inaba's house after a bit of walking, Kiriyama stopped suddenly.

This area seemed to be undergoing reconstruction. The open ground surrounded by fences was sort of eye catching. There were also several abandoned buildings there.

"What's wrong?"

"...Back when I still visited the dojo, my jogging route passed by this area."

"You mean karate? Now that you mention it, Kiriya, when did you stop practicing karate?"

"Second year in middle school... Right around when I was almost assaulted, I think."

Crap, he stepped on a land mine.

"Ah... Sorry."

Kiriya shook her head.

"It was way back then. I'm fine now."

Kiriya had androphobia, but now she was slowly transitioning to merely 'finding it a little difficult' to deal with them. She was getting visibly better every day.

"But this place has changed a lot since I last jogged here... Such as that open ground over there. Ah, the store that was here is gone too..."

"You sure remember it well. Did you have some kind of memory here?"

"Not really... But how did I remember? Ah, was it because of that event yesterday? ... I think I was... eleven years old... Whoa, I recalled something again..."

"——Kiryama!"

A female shouting voice suddenly sounded.

Taichi and Kiriyama looked around in surprise.

There was a girl with pony-tailed hair in flexible attire: a wide, black jacket and jeans. She looked to be slightly older, although it could be argued that it was due to her stern expression. Her incisive face accentuated that.

The girl was staring sharply at them... No, only at Kiriyama.

"Eh...? Who are you?"

Kiriyama asked, looking somewhat intimidated.

"W—Who am I...? Are you saying you don't remember me!?"

The girl walked towards them, her voice filled with anger.

"Huh? Eh... Ah, you are Mihashi... Chinatsu?"

"That's right... How come you didn't recognize me right away?"

"Eh, that's because... your look has become so mature, it felt really different than from what I remember..."

"... I see... Who's that guy next to you? Are you guys dating?"

Kiryama was caught completely off guard by the question and was panic-stricken for a while (her expression was so obvious Taichi was tempted to publish it in a textbook) before she finally calmed down and introduced Taichi and the girl to each other. It turned out that the girl, Mihashi Chinatsu, was in the same year as they were.



"Er~ This is Yaegashi Taichi-san. He's in the same club as I am, and we're about to head to a friend's house. He is not my boyfriend. I can guarantee that. He is definitely just a friend!"

"... Don't you think your denial is a little too specific?"

Did Kiriyaama really dislike being mistaken as a couple with him that much? Maybe she was just being shy.

"This is Mihashi Chinatsu-san. We used to be... er... friends in the karate tournaments organized by the karate school I was a part of..."

"I don't consider us friends."

The other commented bluntly. Kiriyaama made an "Auu..." sound and winced.

Mihashi was not very friendly towards Kiriyaama.

"B—But it sure has been a while hasn't it? We never saw each other again after you moved, Mihashi-san. I think that was around our second year in middle school..."

"——Never mind that for now, Kiriyaama."

Kiriyaama gathered herself and tried to cheerfully start a conversation, but Mihashi interrupted her coldly.

"You haven't...given up on karate, have you?"

She said it in a sad and low tone. It made Kiriyaama stiffen like a rock, unable to give a response.

Mihashi stared at Kiriyaama with a harsh but slightly earnest expression.

"It can't be true, right?"

As Mihashi persistently questioned her, Kiriya finally answered:

"I have...given up."

Mihashi's eyes widened in astonishment.

"You—You're kidding! I've heard the rumours about the 'Prodigy' Kiriya retiring but..."

Kiriya, with her outstanding athletic abilities and overwhelming talent for martial arts, was a legend in the female karate league.

"...I'm sorry... I really have given up."

"But... What about our 'promise'!?"

Mihashi suddenly raised her voice and shouted.

"Our... promise?"

Kiriya said in an uncertain manner. Mihashi's expression became overwhelmed by shock.

A sorrowful shadow spread across Mihashi.

"...Why? Are you... injured?"

Mihashi asked in a way as if she was squeezing words out of her throat.

"No... It has nothing to do with injury."

"Then why?"

"It's because... I can't do it anymore..."

"What... What you mean you can't do it anymore?"

"Eh... That's..."

As Mihashi kept questioning her, Kiriyaama was gradually losing her ground.

Taichi initially thought that he should not intervene until their relationship was clarified, but now he decided to step in. Besides, there wasn't much time left.

"Excuse me, can you two talk about this later? Kiriyaama, it's almost time."

"Wait, this has nothing to do with you!"

Mihashi threw a vicious and intimidating glare at Taichi.

"I may have nothing to do with your conversation, but we have something important to take care of now."

Taichi proceeded to grab Kiriyaama's hand, but she responded by wincing "No!" and avoided Taichi's hand.

Crap! Taichi thought, and remembered that this was one of Kiriyaama's greatest fears. He had lost his composure.

"I'm sorry, Kiriyaama..."

"Ah... It's alright, I should be the one apologizing."

"What are you two doing?"

Their awkward behavior had left Mihashi dumbfounded.

"A—Anyway, we are in a hurry. Sorry, if you will excuse us."

Learning from his mistake, Taichi grabbed hold of Kiriyaama's shopping bag instead. He pulled the bag, hurrying Kiriyaama.

"Hey, wait a minute!"

"Uh... I really can't help it right now... I'm sorry."

Kiriyama said this while avoiding eye contact with Mihashi, and, as if trying to escape, hurried off with Taichi.

"I will not accept this!"

Mihashi shouted in the end, watching the two leave with utmost animosity.



"So... what exactly is your relationship with that girl back there?"

Taichi asked while they hurried to Inaba's house.

"... We practiced the same school of karate... Oh, but we visited different dojos. We only really saw each other in tournaments..."

Kiriyama lowered her head.

"I see. So you two had that kind of friendship."

"Yeah. Well... I'd say our relationship was closer to that of being rivals than friends."

"So that's what your world was like back then huh, Kiriyama... That's amazing isn't it? To have a rival like that."

"... Used to be like that."

Her brief muttering was filled with many different emotions.

"After Mihashi-san moved far away, we never met each other again. Our karate school doesn't organize cross-country tournaments. Not to mention, I don't practice karate anymore..."

"I see. But why did Mihashi-san suddenly appear in this town again?"

"I don't know. Maybe she moved back."

She did not seem to be very happy about her reunion with an old acquaintance. Then again, Mihashi was not very nice about it either.

Taichi began to worry if this reunion would stir up any emotional problems for her.

They were undergoing the 'Time Regression' phenomenon, after all (it seemed that way). During critical times like this, even minor nuisances could have the potential to become disasters.

"Good morning-hello~"

A cheerful greeting sounded. Nagase Iori, who was dressed in an orchid tone down jacket and jeans, joined the two from across the street. She also had a knit cap over her head.

"...Hm? How come you weren't coming from the station? Where did you... C— Could it be that, Taichi... after Inaban, you are now trying to conquer Yui as well?"

Nagase's remark was really unnecessary.

"Eh? After Inaba... what?"

Kiryama's head was filled with question marks.

"No, it's nothing, Kiriyaama! It's not important! And Nagase, we're clean! We were both just walking around the area because we were too early!"

Inaba's confession to Taichi and their involvement in this love triangle were secrets kept from the others at the moment (Taichi proposed to stay low, but the two girls didn't seem to mind in the slightest. Sometimes Taichi wished that they would give him a break).

"I'm not so sure about that... You made *that* Inaba fall for you after all. Considering that, Taichi, you have immense potential you know..."

"Hm? What you mean by 'made Inaba fall for you'?"

"It really is nothing, Kiriyaama! And Nagase! You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"

"It's fun to see Taichi so shaken, you know! Teehee!"

Nagase giggled happily.

As the three walked side by side, Taichi peeked at the side of Nagase's face.

About 'that deal', Nagase appeared to have come to terms with Inaba. But how did Nagase really see it?

It had been a month since the end of the 'Desire Unleash' phenomenon, and Nagase seemed to be no different than her usual self. In fact, she seemed to have returned to the state before she and Taichi confessed to each other.

After the confession, there was a time when the two were trying to decide what kind of relationship they would maintain. But the Nagase now was behaving like how a good friend would towards Taichi. It was as if nothing had happened.

Nagase's shift in behavior was one of the reasons why Taichi had been indecisive.

"Hm? What's wrong, Taichi? Do I have something on my face?"

"No, it's nothing."

What exactly was Nagase thinking about beneath that pure and beautiful smile?

"Ho ho, are you captivated because I'm too cute? Hm? Hm?"

"H—Hey don't push your face towards me like that!"

...Just what was she really thinking?

"To be honest, even though yesterday I said that it would be fine to go home, I was really scared; so scared that I thought I was gonna die. I wouldn't have known what to do if my deduction was wrong..."

Inaba Himeko let out a deep sigh as all of the CRC members gathered at her house.

"Inaba-chan is still amazing though! You made such a bold decision even though you were worried sick!"

Aoki was stretching his legs and seemed completely relaxed as he spoke.

Taichi might argue that Aoki was equally impressive for maintaining such composure despite the hairy situations they were in.

Inaba's room appeared almost exactly the same as it was the last time they visited—it was well composed and emphasized efficiency—but there were

some slight differences. Vivid colors never seen before could be found in the room.

Also worth mentioning was that Inaba was actually using a pillow with big red heart designs on it. Given Inaba's personality before, this was unimaginable.

"It's going to be twelve soon... yet it still doesn't feel real to me; are we really going through this again?"

Nagase remarked. She had completely taken over the bed.

"You'd probably freak out... I'd really love not to get freaked out again, but I doubt things will go that smoothly."

Inaba remarked, and continued:

"While I'd really like to prepare something beforehand... It seems for now, we can only wait."

"But is it really gonna occur again? It's so farfetched, I still have a hard time believing it..."

"This is actually the first time we know when a phenomenon will occur though~ Ack, my gut is wrenching."

Nagase and Aoki said respectively. Meanwhile, Kiriya made out an "Ah" sound.

"Now that you mention it, Inaba... Is waiting at your house okay?"

"Yeah, it should be. My family won't be coming home till five, so we don't need to worry about causing a commotion by having somebody see us turn into children... but that's only if the phenomenon really does end at five."

Inaba checked the time on her cell phone and answered.

"It's almost twelve— ...Why is somebody calling here now? Who is it? What's with this timing?"

Inaba frantically picked up her phone.

"What do you want, stupid Aniki^[2]? Hurry and spit it out!"

It would seem that it was her older brother who called, but that certainly didn't sound like how a younger sister would treat her brother.

"Okay... Mhm... Wait what?! You're bringing girls home and you're telling me to get out of the house!? The hell with that, you thick head! I have things——"

Inaba hung up her cell phone.

"Ugh...!"

She pressed against her chest with one hand, while barely managing to hang up the phone with the other.

"Huh? Wait, Inaban?"

Nagase stood up anxiously.

Meanwhile, Aoki also started moaning.

"Eh... Whoa... What the..."

"Ah, Aoki!"

Kiriyama screamed.

The next moment——

Inaba and Aoki shrunk.

Actually, shrunk was not the right word. It looked as if it was a trick played by god, who used some kind of method incomprehensible by the human mind to switch the bodies.

Inaba, who was just standing there, suddenly became a toddler before learning age. Aoki, on the other hand, became what seemed to be a grade-schooler.

"You're kidding——"

"Wha—Wha—Wha—What in the world is going on!?"

Needless to say, Nagase and Kiriyaama, who had both just witnessed the phenomenon for the first time, exclaimed in awe.

At first, Nagase and Kiriyaama were squealing in excitement. Sounds of "Wow~", "Hyaaa~", "Whaa~", "Whoa~" could be heard in the background. Although, they eventually exhausted themselves.

They inquired about the age of the children. Aoki answered "Ten", while Inaba replied "Four" in a small voice.

They could not just leave the over-sized clothes on them, so Taichi and the others helped the two get dressed.

They had brought clothes of different sizes under Inaba's instructions.

As expected from Inaba, she had considered all possible scenarios.

It was worth mentioning that when Taichi asked his sister to lend him some clothes, he was met with her howling: "Thick head! Pervert! What are you gonna do with them? I hate you! I prefer the Onii-chan from before, the one who wasn't like this!" Taichi had almost lost all hope of living.

Nagase tilted her head in front of Inaba(4) in puzzlement.

"Hm~ Aoki's jersey and sweat pants should be fine with a bit of folding... But what are we going to do with Inaban?"

Next to Taichi, Aoki(10) raised his arms meaninglessly and said: "Yay~"

Since the CRC members did not have the proper clothes for a four year-old child, the group folded the clothes several times before putting them on Inaba(4). Hence, Inaba(4) looked puffy in the clothes. She stared in astonishment as Nagase helped her with the clothes.

"Say..."

Nagase and Kiriya lowered their heads, and sounds of anxiety could be heard.

Even though they had handled the situation fairly readily, it was very strange no matter how one would think of it. It was not surprising that the two felt stressed out——

"Mini-Inaban is SOOOOO ADORABLE~~!"

——or not.

"Yui thinks so? Me too! Look at those big round eyes and soft mushy cheeks! Too cute~~!"

Kiriyama and Nagase began fondling Inaba(4) all over.

"Ah! So cute~~ You can see the face that will grow into an ice queen beauty, yet with a heavy dose of cuteness only a little child would have. This is WONDERFUL~~!"

"To think this is *that* Inaban, I can't take it anymore! Ahaha~~!"

Intimidated by the girls' sudden frenzy, Inaba(4)'s eyes anxiously looked around for help.

The boys could only watch and maintain a safe distance.

"...Girls are scary."

Aoki(10) sighed.

Girls, let's not traumatize this ten year-old young man.

"Phew... I'm satisfied."

"I've refilled my 'Cuteness Meter'..."

After some passionate hugging and cuddling, the two were finally satisfied and let Inaba(4) go.

Inaba(4) seemed to be terrified of the girls due to that, and was glued behind Taichi.

"Say... Himeko-chan~~ You don't have to be this scared, you know."

Nagase tried to lull her in a sweet tone, but Inaba(4) held even tighter onto Taichi's sleeves.

"Er... You might want to take it easy for now."

"Mmm... Sorry... I'm reflecting right now."

"Ah! I should apologize too. I'm sorry Himeko-chan."

Kiriyama apologized. Since they found it awkward to address a young child by their last name, they had decided to address the two with their first names instead.

Aoki(10) was engrossed in the manga he found on the shelves, which was why he was behaving very nicely.

"They really did 'turn into children'! That was amazing... Hm?"

Nagase, who was murmuring while gazing at the ceiling, suddenly faced forward.

"Say... Are we forgetting something important?"

"Something important?"

Now that Nagase mentioned it, what was happening before?

"Let me think... I remember Inaban was on the phone..."

"Ohhh!"

Kiriyama noticed something and shouted.

"I remember... something about Inaba's brother saying 'bringing girls home so get out'..."

"That's the one!"

Nagase snapped her finger.

"So Inaba's brother is coming home, right? If he sees this..."

Taichi murmured and peeked at Inaba(4) behind him. Inaba(4) blinked, as if she was asking "What's wrong?"

...This is bad, Taichi thought. This is beyond bad.

"Oh no! If only Inaba didn't turn into a child, she could have at least thought of something. But this is not good!"

Nagase's tone became something like that of a child from the Edo era. A panic-stricken Kiriyaama asked her:

"Is there anyone home at your place, Iori? What about Taichi?"

"No, my mom isn't home at the moment, but she'll be home before five."

"I can't guarantee there won't be anyone at my house before five either... But it might work out if we just stay in the room..."

"You're bringing home two girls, a ten year-old boy and a four year-old little girl. Are you sure your family won't say anything about that?"

Kiriyaama fixated on Taichi.

"My mother probably won't... but there's no way I can make it past my sister."

"...You mother won't say anything, huh."

Kiriyaama looked at Taichi in sympathy.

"Club room... but bringing a child into school will gather too much attention... Ugh! Some place that doesn't catch people's eyes... What about karaoke? How's that?"

Nagase suggested.

"Ah, that's not a bad idea. Let's try that."

"But if we walk in with children and then walk back out with everyone being high-schoolers... Don't you think that would gather suspicion...? Ah—"

Taichi said and realized that he needed to take that factor into account as well.

Inaba(4) and Aoki(10) would most likely return to normal at five o'clock.

"How about a love hotel?"

"Hm? Love hotel?"

As Nagase was suggesting that, Aoki(10), who was supposed to be engrossed in the manga, responded.

"Can you not pick a better timing to respond? You dirty brat!"

Kiriyama smacked on the floor.

"How are we supposed to even step into a hotel like this..."

Taichi remarked. Suddenly, a scene during the morning reemerged in his mind.

"Hey, Kiriyama, how about that place we went by earlier?"

"That place we went by? ... Oh! I see. Is there an entrance there? If we can find one then it doesn't seem like a bad place. I hope it isn't too cold..."

"What? What? Taichi and Yui, stop being so secretive, you're making me curious."

"You'll see when we go there. Anyway, let's head out. Ao... I mean, Yoshifumi-kun too."

"Eh~ Lemme finish this volume!"

"We don't have that kind of time to waste!"

Kiriyama smacked at the floor twice.

Kiriyama and Aoki's relationship didn't seem to have changed much despite the latter being turned into a ten year-old kid.

"Oh, amazing. Not bad at all."

Nagase looked around the room.

This place was one of the buildings in the reconstruction zone. They broke into one of the abandoned four-story apartments.

Even though it was abandoned, the building seemed to be in use until only recently, as they could tell by the fairly clean environment. It was made of concrete and steel, and appeared to be insulated as well, so the interior was not unbearably cold.

If it weren't for the 'To Be Taken Down' sign at the gate, people would think of this as nothing more than an empty apartment.

"This looks like a good place for a 'secret hideout'! Wow, I'd be thrilled if I were a little younger!"

Upon hearing Aoki(10)'s remark, Taichi and Nagase looked at each other, and burst out laughing.

"Wha—What are you laughing about?"

"We were thinking that... you're a child too."

Nagase continued giggling.

"Pfft, you're a kid too you know."

"What? I'm a grown up!"

"Well then have you 'smooched'? 'Smooooch'~"

"Wha—wha—wha—smooch! Smooch! Smooch!"

Nagase peeked at Taichi. Her cheeks became bright red.

Taichi felt the same; his face was burning up as well.

"Of—Of course I did! 'Smooching' and stuff... I mean... strictly speaking it wasn't my body... No, that has to be a 'smooch'. It wasn't a hundred percent, but it was certainly a seventy percent 'smooch'."

"Seventy percent? Why do I get the feeling that you're lying~"

"I—I did not lie!"

"Then what does it taste like?"

"You—You—You—You say taste? What on earth have your parents been teaching you!?"

Nagase seemed to get along with Aoki(10) very well.

Perhaps it was due to Nagase being able to see things at a child's perspective (not saying she's the same as a grade-schooler though).

Like Nagase and Kiriya during their 'Time Regression', Aoki(10) and Inaba(4) did not question their situation.

While the CRC members had no idea how a child's brain worked, it would seem correct to say that the two would 'simply accept what was happening' without a second thought.

"...Say, we sort of just ran out here. Was that really okay? What if one of us underwent 'Time Regression'... Wouldn't that be chaotic?"

Taichi replied to Kiriya's comment from behind:

"Probably. I mean, we did rush out under the assumption that 'we'd stay this way until five o'clock'."

"But judging by what we've seen so far, maybe that assumption is correct."

This phenomenon wasn't a random occurrence between twelve to seventeen o'clock, but rather some random person would undergo 'Time Regression' at twelve o'clock and stay that way for five hours.

While they could not be certain, chances were this was true.

It didn't seem to be completely random since everything up until now followed a rather orderly pattern.

"I guess being able to find this place is a pleasant fluke. It's a bit dirty, but it isn't unacceptable."

Kiriya swiped the thin layer of dust on the floor with her finger tip.

"This building isn't as old as the others. Good thing the windows on the first floor weren't locked. We couldn't just destroy the property just to get in..."

It was obviously a crime when they trespassed in here. But since this was an emergency, Taichi hoped that they would be allowed some leeway.

——*Cough, cough!*

Inaba(4), who had been grabbing onto the bottom of Taichi's shirt, started coughing.

"Are you alright?"

Taichi inquired. Inaba(4) nodded in response.

"Let's pick a room and clean it up a little. The dust here is too much for Himeko-chan to handle; she might get ill."

Taichi and the others followed Kiriya's opinion, and cleaned up what seemed to be an office room with eight working desks located on the second floor.

"I bought us drinks and snacks. And I also bought us this~"

Nagase returned from the store.

At that point, they were becoming certain that the remaining members would not transform.

"What's that bulky thing you're carrying?"

Taichi asked. Nagase eagerly took out a box.

"It's a portable lamp! That way we won't have to worry about light source when it gets dark."

"Do we really need something that big..."

"It's a discount item from the department store clearance sale anyway. No big deal. And besides, I get to keep it after we're done with it. Teehee!"

What was she going to do with that? She was a curious creature as always.

Nagase turned around and asked Inaba(4):

"What would you like to drink, Himeko-chan?"

"This one. Orange juice."

"Here you go~"

Inaba(4) picked up the bottled drink from Nagase. Since Iori and Yui were behaving towards her nicely, Inaba(4) seemed to be less alert around them now.

"Say... an Inaban that can't enunciate clearly is TOO CUTE~~!"

"Easy, you're gonna scare her again!"

Inaba(4) fled behind Taichi.

"Mmm~~ Seeing Inaban glued to Taichi like that kinda stings."

Feeling discouraged, Nagase picked up her own bottled drink.

"Here, thanks for cooperating with us so nicely, Yoshifumi-kun."

Kiriyama gave a bottle of juice to Aoki(10) and petted his head.

"Thank you very much~"

Aoki(10) thanked shyly.

"...You alright?"

Taichi whispered to Kiriyaama.

He did not mention 'touching a boy', but hinted it towards her.

"Mhm, he's just a child after all."

Kiriyaama beamed gently.

"Hehehe, Nana's sister's compliment makes me feel lucky!"

Aoki(10) smiled innocently.

"Hm? Nana?"

Kiriyaama raised her eyebrow.

"Eh? Is onee-chan not Nana's sister? I thought that was the case."

Aoki(10) said surprisingly.

Something was odd.

"Hold just a second, Ao...Yoshifumi-kun, can you say my full name?"

They had not verified that yet.

"Yaegashi Taichi-san?"

"What about the girl over there?"

"You called me?"

Taichi pointed towards Nagase, who was sitting on the chair eating.

"Nagase Iori-san."

"Then...what about this girl right here?"

"Isn't she Nishino Nana's sister? Oh, or was it her relative? They look very alike."

Aoki(10) seemed to believe that Kiriyama Yui was a relative of someone called Nishino Nana.

"Eh... I am... Kiriyama Yui..."

Kiriyama asserted and smiled confusingly.

"...Kiriyama Yui? So you're not Nana's relative?"

"I don't know...that person you speak of."

"I see. You sure look alike though! ...Okay, so onee-chan is Kiriyama Yui. Understood!"

"What? What's going on?"

Nagase Iori rushed towards them and asked.

"I'm not sure, but ten year-old Aoki seems to have mistaken Kiriyama for someone else."

"Mistaken Yui for someone else?"

"...Let's wait till after Aoki returns to normal and see if he knows anything about that. There's no point in pressing the child."

Kiriyama quickly ended the conversation. Taichi decided to leave it alone for now as well.

The sky had become darker.

The room did not have power, but they had the portable lamp that Nagase brought back. Therefore Taichi and the others were able to maintain a minimal light source.

"I. Na. Ba."

"I~ Na~ Ba~"

Inaba(4) wrote as she followed Taichi's reading.

"Hi. Me. Ko."

"Hi~ Me~ Ko~"

"Wow. Impressive, Himeko-chan! You can already write your own name with romaji."

Taichi petted Inaba(4), who smiled happily.

There wasn't much a child could do in an abandoned apartment. Inaba(4) seemed to be bored, so Taichi decided to teach her writing.

Inaba(4) was very intellectually curious and a fast learner too. There were traces of what would become the present Inaba's clear and sharp mind(not that it was supposed to mean anything).

Meanwhile, the door flung open with a loud bang.

"Alright! I win! I'm faster!"

Nagase, who went out before to explore the apartment, barged into the room. Aoki(10) came in right after.

"Darn! You are older and you cheated!"

"Did not! You're going to look bad if you don't gracefully admit defeat!"

They seemed to be racing.

"Ugh. This is why you're never gonna get to 'smooch'!"

"Wha—!? Didn't I say I've 'smooched' before? Seventy percent had! No wait... that absolutely counted as my 'smooch'! I've decided! My first kiss was perfect!"

"Th—Then what does it taste like?"

"Er...tastes like tuna?"

...Is Nagase completely oblivious to the fact that her 'smooch' partner is sitting right here?

"What's wrong?"

Noticing Taichi's awkward expression, Inaba(4) asked innocently.

"It's nothing. I'm just thinking that 'that' must be very important to girls..."

"Smooch?"

"D—Don't worry about it. It's too early for Himeko-chan..."

Taichi suddenly remembered that he pretty much kissed the future version of the child in front of him (due to their special condition, he wasn't sure whether 'future' was the right word).

Although he wasn't exactly going to blush nor feel embarrassed towards a child, it still felt a little awkward.

"Will I become a grown up if I smooch?"

"It's not like that... more like it's something only a grown up gets to do."

"When will I get to smooch?"

"At least not until the autumn of the first year in high scho— Wait, that's not the point! It's too early for Himeko-chan. I forbid you to say 'smooch.'"

"Kiss?"

"Using a synonym doesn't make it any better..."

"Deep kiss?"

"That's even worse! Where did you learn that term anyway!?"

"Lemme think. From a German film."

"That's...deep. You watched that as a four year-old? I'm...I'm in awe."

"Sorry to interrupt you guys, but it's almost five o'clock!"

Kiriyama reminded.

"Oh, that's right... So no changes so far, but will return to normal at five... Is that so?"

They should be able to verify it soon.

Nagase repounded to Taichi's murmuring.

"Yep. By the way, Taichi, how do they change back? Is it as sudden as the beginning?"

"Yeah. Before you realize it, the two will return to normal right there. Something like that."

"So, if you fixate on them during the change, will you see anything?"

As Nagase murmured, Kiriyaama jumped up suddenly, making a loud rattling noise with the chair.

She looked like a strategist who suddenly found a fatal flaw in the plan right before carrying out a mission.

"...the clothes?"

"Huh?"

Kiriyaama's voice was barely audible, so Taichi inquired again.

"I said, what happens to the clothes?"

"The clothes stay the same... Ah."

Nagase and Kiriyaama were wearing their normal clothes yesterday, but today they dressed Inaba and Aoki with child-sized clothes. Needless to say, those clothes were way too small for their original bodies. Worst case scenario was that the clothes would rip... Since they had no idea how the transformation worked, they couldn't really tell.

"This is bad! If she finds herself naked after returning to normal... Inaba will go nuts!"

"Ack, we better hurry and change her clothes! Iori, do it now. As for Aoki... he should be fine! His clothes look like they're made of flexible materials."

"Eh? What's the hurry?"

Aoki(10) asked in astonishment. Nagase and Kiriyaama rushed towards Inaba(4).

However, as they approached her with such uptight expressions, it seemed to have revived the terrible memory in Inaba(4) (even though the two insisted that they were just spoiling her,) who fled behind Taichi.

"Taichi! Move out of the way! Hurry!"

"I-I know! It's alright, Himeko-chan."

"Mmm~~"

Inaba(4) clung tightly to Taichi's shirt and refused to leave his side.

"Now what..."

"This is not the time for that, Taichi! Just... Ah! We're out of ti——"

Kiriyama stopped short and became speechless.

At that instant, Taichi felt somebody growing bigger behind him.

"Ack! I can't breath... the shirt is too tight!"

Aoki, who was standing at the front of Taichi's view, had returned to normal and began tidying himself.

Nagase and Kiriyama, who were right in front of Taichi, recovered from shock as well.

"Ahhhhhhh! Inaban! Stop! Don't move!"

"Taichi! DO NOT look back! You absolutely MUST NOT look back!"

"G—Got it!"

Taichi pretended that he was a statue and remained still, thus barely averting the crisis in the end. (At some point Taichi was struck in the back of his head

by a certain someone. That attack was dangerous, he thought. He really wished she would be at least more mindful.)

"I see. It is indeed commendable that you were able to find this place." Inaba remarked.

After the chaos subsided, the club members began their discussion.

"This time also had somebody stay transformed from noon to five in the afternoon. I'm guessing we can call that a verified fact now."

Just as Inaba pointed out, it was hard to believe that having people transform and revert back to their usual selves twice at exactly the same time was mere coincidence.

"...I must say though, having no recollection of the past five hours gives me the creeps. I mean, I'm going to be completely helpless during those hours should anything happen..."

"You could at least trust that we'll cover for you."

Taichi said, and Inaba agreed and nodded: "Yeah. I guess you're right."

"So those writings on the board were hints left by «Heartseed»?"

Nagase murmured to herself.

"In that case, the fact that only four of our names were written on the board might mean something..."

Inaba shifted her eyes towards Taichi, who cringed inside his chest.

"Could it be that Taichi is the only one not affected by the 'Time Regression' phenomenon?"

Aoki precisely pointed out the correct answer, which made Taichi even more nervous.

"Hmm, that's the only possibility we can think of now. Whatever, I'm sure we'll find out later... Well then, any other problems?"

Inaba changed the topic. Taichi sighed in relief in his mind, and proceeded to ask:

"Oh, now that you mention it, when Aoki was a child he seemed to have confused Kiriyama with somebody else."

"What do you mean?"

"Eh? What's that? Please tell me the details!"

Kiriyama did not look at the exclaiming Aoki, and said in a calm and quiet tone:

"May I ask...if you knew Nishino Nana?"

Aoki froze in an awkward gesture.

"How did Yui... Where did you hear that name?"

"The ten year-old you insisted that I was Nishino Nana's sister."

Aoki held his breath and was unable to say another word.

"Who is...Nishino Nana?"

Kiriyama's question struck Aoki speechless.

After a short pause, he seemed to have forfeited. He smiled wryly and said:

"She was a girl about my age who used to live near me. I think we became familiar with each other around third or fourth grade. She was the daughter of some big name firm owner, I think, and went to a private school, so we weren't in the same school. And then... we went out around the first year in middle school."

Aoki was not talking about anything bad. But for some reason Taichi wished he could stop listening. He kept feeling that something terrible was about to happen.

"And then?"

Everyone else was silent, but Kiriya hurried Aoki to continue.

"At the end of that year, she moved away with her parents... so we broke up. After that we only remained in touch with New Year cards... That's about it."

"Could it be...that Nishino Nana and I...look alike?"

Kiriya asked.

——whether Aoki's ex-girlfriend looked like her.

——whether the ex-girlfriend of Aoki, who declared his love for Kiriya, looked like her.

"...Yes."

Aoki answered.

——that his ex-girlfriend looked like Kiriya.

——that his ex-girlfriend looked like Kiriya, whom he declared his love for.

"I know you two don't seem to have met for a long time... But, if she had entered high school, would she look like me now?"

Kiriyama held her hand on her chest.

"...Very likely," Aoki answered.

The temperature of the room suddenly dropped. They could feel a chilly wind breezing from the darkness of the corners of the room, where the light could not reach.

"That's almost as if..."

"——In other words, if we add that to the conclusion."

Inaba interrupted Kiriyama.

"First we know Aoki knew a girl named Nishino, who looked like Yui. Then Aoki was turned into a child by some freaky phenomenon. Even though his child form would automatically assume everyone around him to be people that he knew, due to Yui's likeness with that Nishino girl, Aoki(10), who had the memory of that time, confused Yui with Nishino's sister. That's all. There are so many rhetorical factors, it just happens to have turned out that way."

Inaba didn't give anyone else a chance to speak and made a seemingly endless speech.

"Mmm~ It must've been that. I mean some of us were turned into children after all. With the body going through all those changes, anything could go weird."

Nagase added, and the conversation ended there.

The group decided to directly meet up tomorrow right at this place, and parted on their ways home.

If they followed their temporary "this should be it" assumption, there should be no problem going home.

Taichi, who had more information than the others, was able to confirm that.

As everyone slowly parted on their separate ways, only Taichi and Aoki were left.

The two sat side by side on the train. Aoki, who would normally be chattering about all kinds of random topics, remained unusually quiet.

His eyes were fixated on the windows before him.

Taichi was hesitant to ask, but thinking that it would be better to ask first than to later regret not asking, he chose to proceed forward. Taichi had already learned that from experience.

"Say, Aoki... That wasn't like you."

He knew it might be a sensitive topic, but Taichi inquired anyway.

"...Hm? Like me?"

Aoki seemed to be dazing out, and appeared a bit slow at responding.

"Er... I thought it was strange to see Aoki looking that awkward."

"...Ahh, you mean my ex looking like Yui. Anyone in my shoe would feel awkward I think. It's as if I..."

Aoki was unsure how to describe it, so he gave up trying to convert it to words.

"Well, in my opinion, if it were Aoki, he'd normally strongly insist on the 'I love Yui no matter what!' kind of stuff."

Taichi said, but Aoki did not immediately respond.

"...Because of the phenomenon, I suddenly recalled those memories and feelings from that time."

Aoki said in a low voice.

"I'm saying... I'm not sure... Even though I know that 'the me from before' would most likely say that... But now... putting all those together..."

"What do you mean by 'the you from before'? What's that about?"

"I remembered my feelings from when I loved Nana. I can't deny those feelings."

Aoki was reverted to his past self, and had to face his past feelings.

"...When we first met, I thought Yui looked like Nana. There was no doubt about that. But, I did not pay any attention to it... Regarding the fact that they look alike, the only thing in my mind was 'they look kinda alike!'... Nothing more."

The train came to a stop.

People got off the train , and then people came on again.

The train began to move again.

"I love Yui. But I... did love Nana. I've always loved Nana, but I, too, feel I love Yui more right now. Then... when did I start to dislike Nana?"

Aoki held his head, and continued to soliloquize.

"I don't remember myself ever disliking Nana... We only broke up because she moved... When did I forget that I 'love Nana'? Did that feeling dissipate? Is it still here?"

Aoki looked towards Taichi, his expression looking as if he were a lost lamb seeking redemption.

"Hey, Taichi... What does it mean to love someone?"

Taichi knew he had no right to answer.

The CRC was about to face yet another drastic event.

Something would definitely change.

Things that were changed could never be undone.

No matter how wrong the choices were, they could never be reverted.

Ever.

+ + +

Kiriyama tip-toed into her parents' bedroom, which she rarely visited.

There was a cabinet by the wall.

On it was a display of her past glory.

Trophies.

Medals.

Medallions.

Certificates.

These were all prizes that Yui earned back when she practiced karate.

Yui opened the cabinet, picked up a small medal, and gently rubbed it with her finger.

It was a medal from her participation in a small scale tournament for the first time.

Become a strong girl both in body and spirit — that was her parents' wish. Yui began practicing karate.

It started out as a hobby, but as she became skilled in karate, her father made the decision to have her receive professional training.

Yui, herself, enjoyed karate as well.

Yui reminisced about her eleven year-old self. Although she was not exactly keen about the idea that "karate was her life", practicing karate was indeed part of what had shaped her today.

But since that day — the day she was almost assaulted by a man, she began to fear all men in the world, and she gave up on karate.

Yui did not hold any grudge towards that man.

She only felt that it couldn't be helped, and chose to give up.

There are many tragedies in this world, such as accidents and illnesses. There will always be someone who will run into such misfortune.

She just happened to be one of them.

Since it was not injury or illness, it may not be as bad as it sounds.

It couldn't be helped.

Besides, happiness also exists in this world.

Things like having such great companions by her side.

Slow as it may be, she was able to move forward.

Would that not work out?

That's how the world turns, right?

There could be bad times, and there could be good times.

For humans, some things could never be achieved, regardless of effort — this was what she learned from the encounter with «Heartseed».

She had done her best...

"Onee."

Someone called her name.

Yui jumped and quickly placed the medal back into the cabinet, then looked back.

It was Anzu, her two-year-younger sister. She was standing next to the paper door.

"W—What's wrong?"

"I should be the one saying that, Onee... Are you alright? You're looking at things from when you practiced karate. You rejected them ever since you gave up on karate..."

"It's nothing. I just happened to remember something from back then..."

"Oh."

Anzu did not put another thought into it, and nodded.

"Oh, yeah, Onee, I ran into Mihashi-san today. Do you still remember her? She was the one you always competed against, like your rival."

Mihashi Chinatsu.

Yui didn't expect to hear that name again today.

"I know Onee probably didn't get along with her, but I used to chat with her a lot. And then, Mihashi-san came back to this town. I heard it was only for a short while though."

Why did Mihashi choose to come back now? Right when they were caught in this strange phenomenon?

Was she running into a series of misfortune?

That's right, Yui thought. It must be... She must hold on.

"Huh..."

For some reason, Yui seemed to have missed the chance to mention her encounter with Mihashi.

"I'm not supposed to say this out loud, but Mihashi-san's parents seemed to have divorced. She went through a lot. And then..."

Anzu's words pierced through Yui's ears.

Anzu didn't mean anything particular.

She was just telling Yui what she heard.

But Yui could not help but to think:

That girl was not all that close to her; they had only ever met in tournaments. Yui had already given up karate, so what was the point of hearing about that girl's recent situation?

What was the point of connecting her past memory with her present?

Those past events, for the present Kiriyama Yui, were things that couldn't be helped.

There was no way to start over, and no way to change.

It was meaningless to her now. All meaningless.

Since it was meaningless, there was no point in knowing.

—The same could be said that, since it was meaningless, there was no point in knowing the past of the boy who declared his love for her.

Aoki Yoshifumi, who was transformed by 'Time Regression', mistook her as someone he knew from the past.

Aoki said that she and that person looked alike.

Aoki said that he loved that person back then, and dated her.

He said before that he loved Yui based on instinct.

Instinct.

There was no particular reasoning, only instinct.

He loved her at first sight — she could put it that way, right?

But, if he fell in love with her at first sight, and at first she looked a lot like that other girl, it was as if...

—He loved her because she looked like that other girl.

Not to mention, the only reason Aoki and the other girl broke up was because the girl moved. It was as if...

—Yui was nothing more than a replacement.

Yui didn't know the truth.

Maybe she was overthinking it.

But it felt uncomfortable.

That being said, Yui did not have the courage to ask for an explanation.

She wanted to mock herself.

She used to reject him, deny him, want him to give up; but now, when he started having doubts regarding his feelings for that other girl, Yui felt uneasy and wanted to blame him.

"—Hey... Onee, you listening?"

"Ah, eh? Sorry, I'm listening."

"I was saying... If you wish to, would you like to practice karate again? You never told me why you gave up... But I really loved the cool and strong onee from when you practiced karate..."

Why? Why did Anzu have to bring it up?

Yui's past self.

The past that could not be changed.

The present that could not be redone.

Pain pierced through her chest.

Why did it hurt?

She did not know.

But she knew the present her could not face the past.

She wanted to forget.

She did not want to know about Aoki.

She hated it.

It hurt.

She hated this feeling that hurt.

"...What's wrong, Onee? Why're you crying? Did I say something wrong?
Please don't cry, I'm sorry, Onee..."

She did not know why she couldn't stop the tears either.

Chapter 3 - The Past Self and the Present Self

The next day, Taichi exited through the gate of the train station near Inaba's house. Like the day before, he had arrived much earlier than the agreed meeting time.

"Ta—Taichi? What a coincidence!"

Nagase's reaction seemed over exaggerated today. She was not wearing a knit cap.

"Er, it's kinda normal given the fact that both our destination and meeting time are the same."

"Ah, you're right! Now that I think about it, we ran into each other yesterday too! Yay!"

She was unusually in high spirits.

"But hey, what are the odds of that, though? I guess 'attraction force' really does exist!"

""Attraction force?""

"Oh, don't mind me. I'm just mumbling."

Taichi thought he caught a glimpse of sorrow in Nagase's expression.

"Don't just mumble to yourself like that... If you need something, by all means, tell me."

"It's alright~ It's alright! If I need your help I'll ask you! Act~ tual~ ly~ What I want to say is, Taichi, that goes for you too!"

Nagase narrowed her eyes.

"Ah... Of course."

"Why are you avoiding my eyes? Look at me when you answer!"

"Er no, I thought it was embarrassing... Aren't you a bit too hyper this early in the morning?"

Even though Nagase was usually energetic, today she appeared more energetic than usual.

Especially since they were still being haunted by a phenomenon like 'Time Regression'...

"Taichi overthinks too easily, and you always overburden yourself. It's a selfish mentality, you know!"

"Please don't say 'selfish' with a bright and cheery smile on your face like that."

It was something that concerned Taichi very much. However, even though he was being directly called out like that, he didn't seem to feel too uptight about it.

"Ah, now that I think of it, Taichi, are you hiding something from us?"

Taichi cringed at that question.

"N—No, of course not! Yeah... Er... What makes you think that?"

He could not afford to bring up «Number Two». He had to keep it a secret. Not to mention, Taichi had a feeling that 'they' might be 'observing' them at any moment. He could not defy them, only obey.

"Hmm... Instinct!"

Nagase could be very intuitive at times, Taichi thought. He best not underestimate her.

The two headed towards the abandoned apartment from the day before.

"In the end... Is it everybody except Taichi who is caught by 'that person's gimmick' this time?"

Nagase asked suddenly.

"I—I'm not sure. B—But those writings on the board seem to be accurate so far."

How much could he reveal, by «Number Two»'s standard, before it was considered a violation? Not to mention Taichi had no idea what those beings had in mind.

"Mmm~ Well, should I ask Taichi for help then? ...I feel like I shouldn't be asking for too many favours... But..."

"Didn't I just say 'tell me whenever you need something'?"

"...Of course this is how it'd end up! But it feels like I'm using you, and that kinda bothers me!"

"You don't need to worry about that."

"I owe you too much already... C'mon, Taichi, you could at least rely on me a little! Even though I can't be much help compared to Inaban..."

"That's not true!"

Taichi seemed to have gotten agitated, which surprised Nagase.

"...Nagase helped me a lot too. Your smile and your cheerfulness bring me strength and such."

"Odd. Am I really the cheerful, energetic type of girl?"

"Not only that, of course, but that's part of the whole picture... At least that's how I think of it. Or should I say, you give me that kind of impression right now."

"Hm! Is that so~"

Nagase smiled shyly.

"...Okay then! Let's ask Taichi for a favor then!"

"What is it?"

"Just for a little... Can you observe the child me carefully? To see what kind of child I was like back then."

Nagase's voice came out with her foggy white breath. It was clear...but cold.

What was her true self like? Nagase had always been asking herself that question.

Not many people could answer her.

Normally speaking, life could go on even when there was no clear answer to that question.

But once aware of it, there would be no escape. Lost in the sea without direction.

Let alone someone who once had the mindset that 'the self is an act'.

"Ah, it was nothing. Let's not get too obsessed about it. I'm sure I will find 'my true self' eventually," Nagase said brightly.

"But hey~ This is the kind of phenomenon that lets you 'relive your past'!"

Things that would normally never be unearthed were forcefully revealed due to 'Time Regression.'

"We're being forced to revisit our past, even though we can't change it nor undo it. It's hard not to think about it, you know? Something like that... Bleh, what am I saying!"

Nagase sliced the air in front of her with her hand.

"I've been wondering though: Is this on purpose? Maybe it just happens to be that way, hmm... Does «Heartseed» think it would be 'interesting' to see me like this? So he wants to make it even more interesting? Hmm?"

What was «Heartseed» after?

Where was the goal?

"Hmm. There's no point talking about him right now. Whatever."

The two stopped at the red traffic light.

They remained silent as they watched the vehicles driving by.

Taichi suddenly noticed Nagase's fixation at a certain point.

He traced to the object of her view.

There was a six or seven year-old girl holding on to her father's hand, waiting for the traffic light.

Seeing such a scene, Taichi couldn't help but to wonder: What would Nagase, who had several successive fathers due to family complications, be thinking about?

"I have a question for someone like Taichi-san!"

Nagase raised her finger and pointed at Taichi with a handsome gesture.

"What you mean by 'someone like Taichi-san'...?"

Despite being unsure how to react, Taichi tried to point out the awkwardness in her speech.

"This is just an assumption. If you could go back in time, would you like to start over?"

Nagase asked in a purposeful, dramatic tone.

What sort of answer was she seeking?

"...There were times where I thought to myself, if only I did this or that... But truth be told, there wouldn't be such a chance to start over anyway."

Taichi glossed over the question dubiously.

"Normally."

Was Nagase implying that they were 'not normal' now?

"I'm just gonna add that if I ever get the chance to start over, I would take it; and if I can play the role of my character better, I would do that as well."

Nagase asserted with a very determined look on her face.

As if it were predetermined, Nagase became fourteen years old while Aoki became eleven.

"Looks like our assumption can be confirmed now. Not only that, but we can say that it will always be two of us that gets transformed randomly... Even though we can't be certain yet... Also, we can revert to being fourteen years old as well, huh? I knew it."

Inaba remarked as she looked at Nagase(14), so Taichi inquired:

"What do you mean?"

Needless to say, Nagase(14) didn't look that different, especially when compared to when she turned into a child. She only looked slightly younger than usual, so it wasn't necessary to change her clothes.

"I mean the age seems to be completely random and without limit. If it can turn us into ourselves from two years ago, then there's a chance that it can also turn us into ourselves two years after we were born. Would I be correct?"

"I see... So speaking of extremes, we might turn age zero as well?"

"...We might need a baby feeder soon..."

Inaba smiled stiffly.

Like the day before, Taichi and the others spent their time in the abandoned apartment room.

Since the forecast said that the weather would be getting colder, they combined their budget for a heater. It was not exactly a powerful heater, but

with blankets and heat packs it seemed to suffice for the most part. They only needed to hang on until five anyway; it should be enough to keep them from getting sick from the cold.

Their ages post-transformation were on the older side today, so they were able to take it easy for the time being.

At around three o'clock, they thought about getting something warm.

"I'll go take a walk and buy us something along the way... Or would you all like to come along?"

Inaba adjusted her long coat and was getting ready to head out.

"You say 'us all', but would it be okay for Nagase and Aoki to go outside? They're undergoing 'Time Regression' right now."

"After the change, they'd most likely stay like that until five. So where we are shouldn't matter before then. Even if we run into anybody we know, we can just wave it off with something like 'this is a child of our relative, they came to visit for the winter break'."

That could work... Maybe.

"It's a different story if we walk into a karaoke with this set up, but if we're just strolling around the area, I doubt anyone would pay much thought to it. More importantly...to think that we're spending half a day of our lives in this cold, desolate building at the end the year like this... How do you expect me to stay put! I should be rolling around my warm and cozy room right now, dammit!"

"...In the end you really just wanted to stay in the warmth of your room."

"I'll go too~"

Nagase(14) raised her hand.

Nagase(14) was a cheerful and well-behaved child. It was almost like the present Nagase, minus her 'wild and imaginative' aspect.

"Yui and Yoshifumi, you guys coming along?" Inaba asked.

Aoki(11) seemed engrossed in his handheld video game.

"...Oi, Yoshifumi. Did you hear me? Would you like to come along?"

"Hm? Oh... I'm playing games, no thanks."

"Pfft, you home-staying modern little brat!"

"You're not the one to say that."

What was that? Was Inaba playing dumb on purpose to let others jab at her?

"In that case...I'll stay. We can't just leave a child here alone by himself."

Kiriyama smiled gently like a caring sister.

"Eh~ I'll feel bad that way, Nana's sister can go too you know~"

Kiriyama's expression froze.

Again.

Aoki, who was undergoing 'Time Regression', mistook Kiriyama as Nishina Nana's relative once again.

The room entered a state of awkward silence.

"Huh? Aoki-kun, are you confusing Kiriyama Yui-san with someone else?"

Nagase(14) was the first to break the stale atmosphere.

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"Kiryama-san is... Kiriyama Yui-san right? Even though that's a weird question."

"...Oh... Yeah, you're right."

"Strange... You really do look alike, I guess you're a different person after all. That's right~ You're Kiriyama-san."

Aoki(11)'s eyes fixated on Kiriyama's face briefly, then returned to the game screen. He didn't seem to put much thought to it.

"Oi, Yui, don't—"

"I—I'm fine."

Kiryama cut Inaba short.

Even though she was smiling, her expression was stiff.

"...don't think too much about it, okay? And should anything happen, make sure you call us, okay?"

Inaba said again.

"Would you like me to stay? If we can let Kiriyama-san have some fresh air—"

"No, no, I'm fine, Iori...-chan. You don't need to worry. Please take care."

Although Taichi felt concerned about leaving Aoki(11) alone with Kiriyama, he left the room with Inaba and Nagase(14).

"Mmm~~ It's so cold out here~~"

Nagase(14) hid her face behind her scarf and rubbed her hands.

"Would you like to borrow my gloves?"

Taichi asked, but Nagase(14) shook her head.

"Uh-uh, I'm fine. Thank you though, Taichi-san."

"You don't need to be courteous, just take them."

Taichi stuffed his gloves towards Nagase. While it was unclear how the Nagase who was undergoing 'Time Regression' was related to the actual Nagase, he would rather not risk her catching a cold.

"Ah... Thank you... Teehee, they're warm."

Nagase(14) smiled so sweetly that just looking at her made Taichi feel happy. He was right about 'doing something for her,' he thought.

"Look at your face, all happy and satisfied..."

Inaba stared coldly at Taichi.

"In that case, as a form of gratitude... I love you, Onii-chan!"

Nagase(14) suddenly grabbed onto Taichi's left arm.

"O—Onii-chan!?"

Wasn't Nagase(14) calling him Taichi-san before?

"Odd. I thought Taichi-san liked being called 'Onii-chan', no?"

"I do like it... But how did you know?"

Ah——fetish exposed.

"Hmm... Should I say, a woman's intuition?"

Nagase(14) gave off a very sweet, charming smile.

Since the start, Taichi had believed her to be a very caring and observant child towards people around her, especially when it came to people's moods.

Could this be the true prowess of her past adaptive self?

If that was the case, she was certainly incredible beyond imagination.

Suddenly, a strange, belligerent aura approached Taichi's right side.

"How long are you gonna keep holding hands and snickering, hm~? Oni~ Cha~ N~?"

"Owowowow—OW! Ear! My ear is gonna fall off! I'm sorry, forgive me, Inaba!"

"Ah! Inaba-san is taking the other side? That's great, Taichi-san! Having two girls on both your sides."

"Tori! If it weren't for you being fourteen years old, I wouldn't have let you off so easily!"

Inaba was being extra feisty.

"I must say the rose on the right is full of thorns tho—OW!"

"Taichi, stop being so sharp on spot."

"Ahaha, the two of you sync really well! You're like a couple."

"D—Do I and Taichi really...?"

"Yup~! You're like the 'one true pair!'"

"I—Is that so? Iori-chan is such a good girl. I'm going to specially treat you, then."

"In—Inaba just got bribed!"

Nagase Iori(14) is a monster.

Under Nagase(14)'s recommendation, the three decided to drop by the lounge for some coffee at the local department store.

Taichi and Inaba bought some coffee from the vending machine. As they were about to hand Nagase(14) some change, she shook her head.

"Iori-chan?"

"Sorry, Taichi-san, I want to look at something by myself real quick!"

She quickly sped out of their sight as she said that.

"Eh? Oi! What are we gonna do, we should go after her shouldn't we?"

Taichi was panic-stricken, but Inaba didn't seem to mind.

"Mm~ I doubt she'll do anything reckless, we'll be fine. Even if anyone we know sees her, they'd probably just think 'she looks alike' and leave it there."

"But..."

Were they not supposed to keep the risk of a commotion to a minimum?

"We'll be fine, it really isn't as bad as it sounds."

Inaba blew at her coffee; it was still very hot.

"Inaba... Even though you're very meticulous sometimes, you're pretty reckless when you're acting bold."

"Don't you find it captivating?"

"...That's... I can't comment on the 'captivating' part..."

Even under this relaxing setting, Taichi felt uneasy about being alone with Inaba.

Inaba was an important friend.

She was the girl who resolutely confessed to Taichi, proclaiming her love for him.

Even though Taichi replied that he loved a different girl, Inaba expressed that she would not give up.

Afterwards, the two chatted casually, and the time passed like the wind.

Their conversation was suspended.

The one who broke the silence was Inaba.

"...This is her goal."

"Eh?"

"How should I say it... She's too skilled at reading the mood, too smooth at pleasing people."

Inaba took a sip of her coffee. Taichi followed suit.

Sweetness and bitterness began to fill their mouths.

"...She was purposely leaving the two of us alone?"

"Most likely, although I have no idea why or what sort of feelings would make her want to do that."

"This must be...what Nagase mentioned before, the her that would only act according to her surroundings... Is it?"

"Who knows. One thing that's certain, though, is that I am fully convinced that she's a 'good and clever kouhai'^[3]."

Was Nagase(14) a clever girl who preferred to only concern herself with her surroundings?

Was Nagase(14) a girl who played the good girl just to please people around her?

Or was she, Nagase(14), an ordinary girl who was both?

"Doesn't matter anymore... These are all things from the past, am I correct?"

Inaba peeked earnestly at Taichi's eyes.

"...Of course. What matters is the 'present'."

"Is that so..."

Inaba lowered her head.

"...By the way, I just want to verify: I know I heard some of it from you guys... But, what was I like when I was four?"

"A good and obedient girl, and very bright too."

Best not to mention anything about 'smooching'. Definitely!

"...Feels embarrassing to have you compliment me like this. Was I shy?"

"Umm... You were a bit scared of Nagase and Kiriyaama, but that was entirely their fault..."

"Scared...you say? You're right... I've always been afraid of something... Even in the present."

Inaba gazed afar.

Her eyes were peering towards somewhere beyond the horizon.

"That being said, it wasn't so bad when I was only a sprout. It was when I started being a half-ass smarty-pants in middle school that it became miserable."

"Miserable might sound a little extreme..."

"Anyway, I, in the 'present', would rather not let anyone...especially you, to see my past. It's a fact that can't be helped."

"But, even if we see each others' pasts, it won't change anything. Inaba, didn't you just say that they are all things from the past?"

"I want to think that. Even so, something will definitely change. Unlike reminiscing or hearing from somebody else, in this phenomenon, we will be facing a 'complete presentation of a certain someone from the past'. Anything could happen, like Yui and Aoki's situation right now..."

Inaba stopped without finishing her sentence.

The past self that was once yourself, but not quite yourself, yet still was yourself.

"Sometimes there are things that you don't want others to know, and then there are things concerning others that you don't want to know. Some things about other people are better off left in the dark, and some things about yourself are better off not recalled."

The past did not exist 'at this present moment'.

However, if the past appeared 'at this present moment'...

"Something in it will become 'a trigger for a certain definitive event'."

"But so far...we've made it through together, haven't we? I'm sure this time will be the same..."

Taichi said. Even just a little, he wanted to remain positive.

"I guess you're right, we've made it so far. It's really a miracle. But there's no guarantee it will go that smoothly in the future. If we keep walking on the ice, someone is bound to fall through."

When will 'that moment' arrive?

Until 'that moment', would these unnerving phenomena that had been haunting them these past few months ever truly come to an end?

They wouldn't continue until 'that moment' finally came, would they?

"...As a four year-old, my self-awareness wasn't fully developed, so I couldn't really remember what I was thinking back then..."

Inaba briefly bit her fingertip, and let go.

"But ever since that phenomenon yesterday, I felt something as well. I can't quite describe it properly, but I kinda remember some feelings from when I

was small... This feeling was so pure that it became strong, like it was going to swallow me whole..."

Inaba pressed against her chest.

Taichi couldn't even begin to imagine how much everyone must be struggling with their overflowing sentiments. Because he never experienced the phenomenon himself.

"When this 'physical transformation' first happened, I imagined the kind of hell it'd bring us. Since we couldn't afford to let anyone see this, I feared that we'd end up living like fugitives. But as we found out that there was some sort of limit to it, I thought we might actually be able to patch things up. In the end, however, it's still nothing but hell for us..."

Inaba said.

"I've blabbered about a lot of things, but I'm really just trying to say one thing... (sigh)... I'm such a difficult woman."

Inaba said self-mockingly. She looked at Taichi, her eyes wavering.

"I'm worried, Taichi. I... I'm very worried."

Inaba did not overplay anything. She straight out confessed her weakness to Taichi.

Yet, Taichi was unable to share her burden.

"It will be fine..."

He could only comfort Inaba verbally.

Inaba managed to squeeze out a smile at him and said: "I would believe so."



Why could he not be more affirmative in telling her that "It will be fine"?

That was probably because——

"Speaking of such, how come «Heartseed» still hasn't shown up yet?"

"...!"

Taichi almost made a sound but managed to hold it in. Inaba didn't seem to have noticed.

The mastermind behind this phenomenon wasn't «Heartseed».

Taichi was the only one who knew this fact.

«Number Two» only ever appeared before Taichi. He was certain of that, judging by what Inaba said.

Therefore at the time being, everyone's safety fully depended on Taichi's course of action.

"I'd really love not to see him again... But, in situations like this I keep wanting to see him quickly for some info... This feels so awkward."

He was unable to rely on Inaba's analytical prowess, as he could neither share nor discuss anything with her.

Taichi alone carried the weight of everyone's fate.

At five o'clock, both Nagase(14) and Aoki(11) returned to normal.

Just as she came to, Nagase made an "Auu!" moan and held her head.

Taichi hurriedly inquired, but Nagase only replied "I'm just feeling a bit confused in my head". She didn't look too well, Taichi thought. Was she really okay?

"Is this gonna keep happening...?"

As everyone began tidying the room, Inaba muttered to herself.

Since this place would be their hideout for the time being, the club members decided to leave as much as they could behind.

Aoki said:

"At least we know when it's gonna happen, right? That way we'll just have to hold out during those hours."

"That's right. Not to mention we're on winter break, so we don't have to worry about school. However, we'll end up away from home the whole day."

Nagase, who seemed to have recovered her composure, added cheerfully.

"At this rate, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day... How are we gonna explain ourselves to our families?"

Kiriyama's expression turned melancholic.

"Oh! You're right~ I almost forgot about those festive activities. My family rarely ever has any plans to travel to our hometown. What about you guys? Do your families have any plans?"

Nagase inquired.

"My family doesn't so far."

Taichi answered. The others, too, due to either their relatives living fairly close by, or that not every member of their family was planning to travel home, didn't seem to have problems with the conflict.

"Not needing to travel home is a plus for us. Even though we're almost never home during the day, we can go home at night. Not to mention those who aren't transformed can go straight home as well. It's much easier to dispel any suspicions this way."

"But let's stick together as much as possible anyway! Companions support each other!"

Aoki declared assertively. Inaba chuckled.

"Of course... Alright then, let's think positive! Now that I think about it, this way we can be together the whole winter break. As long as we're not being reckless, we can still go outside."

Inaba concluded. Nagase proceeded cheerfully as well:

"We definitely need to go to our Hatsumode! Oh oh! Speaking of New Year, we gotta eat rice cakes~ Yay rice cakes~ And before that we gotta have toshikoshi soba^[4] for the passing of the year! Ah... but I won't keep any of those memories if I get transformed by 'Time Regression'... Isn't that the same as not having eaten any? Noooooooooooooo!"

"Even when you're in this kind of situation you still manage to worry yourself about food..."

Such hardy spirit... Taichi thought as he pointed out the ridiculousness in her statement.

"Now that I think of it, isn't having someone turning into a child the funnest thing around? Ahh, I wanna see mini-sized Inaban again!"

She seemed a little too energetic.

'Mini-sized Inaba' seemed to have caught Kiriyaama's attention as well.

"I—I wanna see chibi-Inaba too! She's so adorable it's like a dream. If we see her again next time... Muhu~!"

"What you mean by 'Muhu~'? What on earth are you trying to do to me, Yui!?"

Inaba backed away slightly.

Kiriyaama Yui. Age sixteen. High school girl who loves cute things.

"Hm? Does this mean I might run into a chibi-Iori too? ...Myuhu~!"

"Myuhu~' sounds much more terrifying than 'Muhu~'! Yui, don't you dare do what I've done to Inaban to me!"

"You——! You did things to me that you don't want to be done to yourself!?"

"Oi, oi, Taichi, just in case, I wanna verify, did I get..."

Aoki seemed concerned. In order to relieve him, Taichi asserted:

"Don't worry. You're completely untouched."

"I see, that's a relief... Hey, that sounded so sad! I was adorable as a kid too, you know!"

What a difficult person.

Even with only a portable lamp as a light source, the room felt unusually bright.

It's amazing, Taichi thought innocently.

The strength between the CRC companions was even able to repel the darkness.

Even if he was powerless, he wanted to do his best: To overcome the phenomenon this time, 'Time Regression'—— Taichi soliloquized and swore deep in his heart.

What really worried him was: Kiriyaama and Aoki did not talk to each other much at all.

+ + +

The second daughter of the Kiriyaama household, Kiriyaama Anzu, received a call from a person who she recently met again by chance and exchanged contacts with.

"You don't know why your sister gave up karate either, Anzu-chan?"

On the other end of the phone was Mihashi Chinatsu, who was in the same year as Anzu's sister, Yui, as well as Yui's rival in karate.

"Yeah, she wouldn't tell me no matter what..."

Mihashi seemed displeased at Yui giving up karate.

"I also heard she's participating in a strange club, isn't she?"

"I think it's a club called the 'Cultural Research Club'... Oh, she's been saying that she has to take care of something in the club lately and is never home during the day."

"A club that even runs during the closing of the year you say, yet you don't know what it's about... What was that about?"

"Well, Onee has always been talking about her club happily to me. Onee, who had been down and lifeless like the walking dead ever since she gave up karate, has gotten a lot more cheerful lately. So really, I'm glad she joined her current club."

This was the truth.

"...Is that so... I see."

"Now that you mention it, Onee seems to be going out for New Year's Eve and New Year's day for club activities as well. Father thinks the family should be spending the New Year together, so they almost started a fight over it."

"She's that passionate about her club, huh."

What is Onee really doing?

Even though looking at the greater picture, Yui did indeed recover some liveliness, she had been acting strange in recent months: Speaking awkwardly, shutting herself in her room, having sudden outbursts of anger, etc... It seemed to have something to do with the club.

"I feel the need to talk to her again... and see what she's been doing lately... Where do her club activities take place?"

"I have no idea, but it doesn't seem to be in the school, since it's winter break. Oh and, she has been searching around the room for children's clothing and bringing blankets outdoors. All of this strange behavior..."

Hm, now that she thought about it, Yui had been... acting strange recently.

So strange that it began to worry Anzu.

"...Looks like we really need to see for ourselves... Do you think we should stalk her?"

"Eh? Stalk... You mean that 'stalk'?"

"Er, I mean, I know it sounds kinda creepy..."

"C—Can I... come with you too?"

Chapter 4 - Because It Was Something that Could Not Be Helped

The very thing he feared was finally realized.

Yaegashi Taichi stood frozen.

He knew it would eventually happen.

But at the same time, he kept telling himself that "Maybe it won't happen."

That day, Nagase Iori and Aoki Yoshifumi were the ones who underwent 'Time Regression'.

Aoki became twelve, but that was nothing of concern.

The real concern was Nagase.

"Dah!"

"Don't 'Dah' Iori! Slow down, wait! Your clothes are falling off!"

Kiriyama fumbled about—She was carrying a baby in her arms.

Yes, Nagase Iori had become a baby!

"Snap out of it, Taichi. Wake up!"

Inaba Himeko slapped Taichi on the face.

"... Ah! Sorry, I was briefly trying to escape reality..."

"I can't say I don't know how you feel..."

Inaba appeared irritated.

"Al—Alright. What do we need now? Do we have the right clothes here?"

"Babies need baby specific clothes! They aren't just gonna stay still you know!"

Kiryama shouted back at Taichi.

"I see. Well, aside from clothes, we're gonna need diapers too right? And we'll need to feed her. So we need to get some milk for the baby..."

Taichi's eyes landed on a certain spot on Inaba's body.

No, that's not possible—— With that in mind he averted his eyes upward, and saw Inaba's face flushing red.

"...Young teenage girls can't breast feed okay!? You thick head!"

"Ow, don't kick me! It was only a thought!"

"Hm, breast feed?"

"Yoshifumi! Will you stop reacting towards dirty words!?"

"Ouch!"

Aoki(12) took a slap in the face from Inaba.

Though Taichi wanted to comment that 'breast feed' wasn't exactly a dirty word to begin with.

"She seems to be a full year old. If we grind up some of our food, she should be able to ingest it."

"Un—Understood."

"Jeez..."

Inaba sighed tiredly.

"Then again... if it were you, I suppose I can let you take a sip..."

"Umph!?"

Taichi choked as he never did before.

"I'm joking of course."

"Tha—That was a too much for a joke!"

He almost visualized it for a moment there.

"...We could make it a reality you know."

Inaba gestured her chest with a tempting look in her eyes.

"No... Wait... That's——"

The sound of a loud *Clank!* came. Apparently Kiriyaama had sent an office desk flying.

"Enough with your nonsense already, we need to hurry and buy ourselves supplies!"

Kiriyaama was furious. Her face was completely red too.

"Uhhh... Waaaah~"

Nagase(1, estimated) was frightened by Kiriyaama's yelling, and started crying.

"Ah, whoa, I'm sorry, Iori-chan! Don't cry! I'm sorry, I shouldn't yell! Don't cry~
I~ Ori~ Good girl~"

"Yoshi~ Fumi~ Good boy~!"

"Yoshifumi quit saying childish things like a grade-schooler!"

"...Er, he *is* a grade-schooler, just saying."

Taichi jabbed at Inaba's remark, even though he agreed that Yoshifumi was being a bit childish.

Taichi had a feeling that it would not be an easy day.

Taichi and Inaba sprinted to the store and returned with the much needed supplies. After putting on some diapers and baby clothes, they were able to keep Nagase(1) in good shape and proceeded to feed her some baby food.

"We should make it warmer for the baby."

Kiriyama put some more blankets on the spacious area of the floor, and continued to take good care of Nagase(1).

She was lacking in spirit lately, but she seemed a bit more cheerful today as she busied herself with nursing Nagase(1).

"Oi, even so, don't put her right next to the heater. Yui, if you can move yourself between them please."

Inaba ordered.

Nagase(1) was fairly quick at climbing around the place. If they weren't careful she might hurt herself at the heater.

Aoki(12) was playing his handheld video game on his chair.

The child-Aoki would stay put as long as he was given a video game. In a sense, Aoki was probably the most manageable one.

"Uweeeh... Waaaaah, waaaaah..."

Nagase(1) suddenly started crying.

"What's wrong? It's alright, good~ girl~"

Kiryama picked up Nagase(1) and tried to comfort her, but it didn't seem to be effective.

"...What's going on? I don't think she's hungry... Is she sleepy?"

As Kiriyama pondered, Inaba next to her spoke:

"...Could it be... Check the diapers."

Diapers.

This was an unavoidable process when nursing babies.

Normally speaking, nobody would really mind a boy changing a baby girl's diaper, or vice versa.

Except that, while this baby was indeed a baby, she was also his classmate: a girl named Nagase Iori.

That's going to raise a lot of ethical problems, Taichi thought.

"...Now that you mention it... I think I smell 'feces'..."

Inaba sniffed briefly.

"Eww, it's the smell of poop! Poop stinks!"

"Just as I tried to express it in a more tactful way too! Yoshifumi, stop saying 'poop'! And you just had to say 'poop' twice!"

"...Back at you, Inaba. Not to mention you're a girl, and you ended up saying it twice as well."

Not that Taichi would mind, but he thought Inaba should have more restraint on herself sometimes.

"Ah... Sorry, my nose's been stuffy so I didn't notice..."

Kiriyama laid Nagase(1) on the blanket.

"Okay, well... Er... What's the next step?"

Kiriyama pressed against her own eyebrows.

"...What should we do next, Inaba?"

"The usual... Just take off the clothes, then the diapers, quickly clean her up and put on some new ones."

"Easier said than done, you know. This is my first time changing diapers, and she wouldn't stop moving... Come gimme me a hand, Inaba!"

"...No thanks, too messy for me."

That was rather irresponsible, giving orders yet not providing any help...

"What you mean 'too messy'? We got no choice! Jeez... in that case... Taichi! Lend me a hand please?"

"I—I'm not sure if that's a good idea."

"But I can't do this alone!"

"...Okay then, I'll help."

Whatever, it's just changing a baby's diapers, Taichi thought and walked towards Kiriyama.

"Er... How are we gonna do this? Should I take off her——ARRRGH!"

A certain someone suddenly bend Taichi's neck around by force. He thought his head was going to fall off.

"Let me do it. Out of the way, Taichi! Even if she's undergoing 'Time Regression', having her butt hole completely exposed to a boy in class is just too sad!"

"You could at least remind me verbally!"

Taichi shouted pleadingly.

Kiriyama was feeding Nagase(1) some apple juice with a covered, baby feeding cup with a straw. Taichi and Inaba watched them with an absent expression.

"...Taichi, I think we can be certain now that you aren't affected at all."

Inaba suddenly said.

"Looks...like it."

Taichi tried to reply as calmly as he could.

"I keep having this weird feeling..." Inaba murmured, "This phenomenon only occurs to four of us. More importantly, «Heartseed» still hasn't shown up yet."

Inaba bit on her fingertip and focused her mind.

"Could it be that the culprit this time is actually someone other than «Heartseed»? ...What do you think, Taichi?"

How did she come to that point?

Taichi felt his heart started racing.

How should he answer her?

He felt it would be better to keep his promise with «Number Two».

But he also felt that, if he told Inaba this piece of information and discussed it with her, they might be able to come up with a better solution.

"That being said though, I think it's 99% unlikely to be anyone other than «Heartseed»."

Taichi remained silent. Inaba did not insist on having Taichi respond to her, so she quickly changed the topic.

"Well then, it's getting kinda dull here isn't it? The weather is nice out there, why don't we go out and get ourselves some fresh air?"

Inaba said. Aoki(12), who seemed to be done with his game, stood up.

"I'll go!"

"Mmm, that's some good spirit there, Yoshifumi. Kids should get more exercise."

Inaba nodded in approval.

"Yui, you're coming right?"

"Eh? But Iori..."

"I don't want to leave the baby in this environment for too long as this isn't exactly the cleanest place on earth. Let's go, we'll be heading out."

Under Inaba's urge, the group decided to take a walk around the area.

The group started playing soccer at the empty grounds (mostly Taichi and Aoki, with Kiriya joining occasionally) and the time passed quickly passed away. The sun, too, had begun setting.

Inaba instructed the group to start packing up.

"Eh~ We're done already?"

Even though he had been constantly running around, Aoki(12) was still very high in spirit.

"Ack... I think we've had enough."

Taichi, on the other hand, appeared exhausted, probably due to his lack of regular exercise.

"You're lame."

"Ugh... Once you get older, you'll end up like me too."

"...Taichi, you should save those lines for when you've become an old-aged father."

Kiriya said with a look of sympathy.

There was an occasion where Aoki(12) confused Kiriya with Nishino Nana's sister again, which deeply frightened Taichi, but Kiriya did not show any sign of concern and calmly put it off. She was most likely trying to convince herself not to think of it too much.

"...Never would've thought I'd get the day to carry Iori like this."

Inaba remarked.

Nagase(1) was cuddling about in Inaba's embrace.

"But we've been exposing the baby out here in the cold for quite a while, is it gonna be alright?"

Taichi asked with concern.

"I was originally going to head back sooner...but this fella seems too energetic for that. Oi, don't grab my chin like that Iori, there's nothing there!"

Just as Taichi and the others arrived at the abandoned apartment——

"Just a minute! You guys over there!"

A familiar voice shouted.

Taichi looked towards the source, only to see a girl with ponytail hair coming out from the shades.

He remembered that girl from around four days ago. She was an acquaintance of Kiriya's from back in the days of practicing karate.

Kiriya said lowly:

"Mi—Mihashi-san?"

Yes, it was Mihashi. Mihashi Chinatsu.

Mihashi seemed to be restraining her anger, as seen from her trembling body.

"Who's that?"

Inaba asked with a puzzled look on her face. Taichi briefly explained it to her.

"Onee!"

Another person came.

It was a girl with a pair of determined eyes, as well as chestnut-hued bob hair that sparked of liveliness.

She looks familiar, Taichi thought.

"Eh, Anzu?"

This time it was Kiriyaama who shouted.

Taichi finally recalled who that was: It was Kiriyaama Yui's younger sister Kiriyaama Anzu.

They had met before... Actually, that wasn't quite correct. Taichi 'met' her during a 'Personality Exchange', where he was switched into Kiriyaama's body.

She looked almost exactly like her sister Kiriyaama, but was apparently taller than the latter.

The two surprise visitors approached Taichi's group, and stopped right before their.

"Oi, what is the meaning of this?"

Mihashi questioned Kiriyaama in a reproaching tone.

"What you mean by..."

"Quit playing the fool. I'm talking about what you've been doing in the building."

"Onee, we saw it all. You're trespassing a deconstruction site. That's illegal!"

Were they found out? Taichi's eyes began wandering around, his mind pondering on the next step.

Inaba, on the other hand, seemed to be observing and staying put for the time being.

"Forget those for now, the real question is...the baby and the child!"

Mihashi's eyes widened.

"Those kids weren't with you when you entered the building right? What's going on? What happened to those other two who were with you?"

She seemed to be somewhat confused as well.

"That's right, Onee! I thought it was weird seeing those two over there carrying a baby store bag back to the building."

"You weren't happen to be watching the building the whole time were you?"

Inaba asked the two.

"Yea, so?"

Mihashi replied in alert.

But Inaba did not panic the slightest and maintained her composure. It was indeed to be expected from Inaba Himeko——

"...Crap."

...Or it could still be pretty bad after all. What the heck, Inaba Himeko.

"Then we entered the building to see for ourselves..."

"Eh!? Mihashi-san even went as far as that?"

Kiriyama was in panic.

"Why can't we? You're the ones who're trespassing here. Anyway, we went in and saw all these food, blankets, lamp and heater..."

Mihashi raised her eyebrow even more.

"The weirdest thing is... There are all these clothes of different sizes! What are those for?"

"Onee asked mom if she has any 'old clothes' left right? I thought that was strange, so this is what that was!"

"Anyway..."

"Please..."

""——explain yourselves!""

The two pressed on with a fiery aura.

"Um... That's because..."

Kiriyama was struck completely speechless.

"Hmm... This really doesn't look good."

Inaba said, which Taichi responded:

"Y—Yea... And it seems they've seen a lot..."

"No, I mean that's a problem too, yes. But more importantly, it's almost five."

"Ah...!"

Both Nagase(1) and Aoki(12) would return to normal at five o'clock.

"You can't be serious!"

"Of course I'm serious."

"How do you remain so calm like that?"

So composed, it's terrifying. Is that really okay? Inaba Himeko.

"So I'm thinking what to do next. Since they've already seen the inside of the building, convincing them with the 'relative' thing may be... difficult. I have thought of other excuses, but if we need to explain it, we might end up spending a lot of time being questioned... So my conclusion is: Run."

"...Huh?"

"I'm gonna take Iori and Aoki through the backdoor, so I'm counting on you to keep them busy for me."

"Oh, okay... WHAT!?"

Inaba, with Nagase(1) in her arms, yanked at Aoki(12) and prepared to leave.

"...Hey! Where are you going!?"

Mihashi noticed Inaba and shouted.

"Enough already, what's with you anyway?"

Mihashi's interest fell on Aoki(12).

"Eh? I'm——Ow!"

"Keep your mouth shut! This way, quick!"

"D-Don't hit me!"

"Waaah!"

"Iori be quiet too!"

Inaba darted out of sight along with Aoki(12) and Nagase(1).

"Hey wait... What?"

Taichi blocked in front of Mihashi as she tried to pursue.

"Even if you ask questions like that, it will be difficult for us to answer."

"Fine. I'll ask you two then."

Mihashi snorted.

"Let's start by explaining the baby."

"Eh, that's a child of someone we know..."

Kiriyama peeked at Taichi's face and said hesitantly.

"Onee, you've been looking at that boy's face since just now... Ah! Could it be..."

Kiriyama's sister widened her eyes.

"Th—Th—Th—That baby, could it be... Onee and the boy's baby!?"

"How could that be possible!? When was I ever pregnant!?"

"Oh, right. Then...the person holding the baby is the mother?"

"No!"

"Ehhh? Then, assuming the boy's the father..."

"Please don't assume that. Normal first year high-schoolers aren't gonna have children!"

"B-But there's no guarantee to that."

"There's indeed no guarantee...but I can guarantee that right now, right here!"

"Then, how are you gonna explain this triangle relationship?"

"Where did that 'triangle relationship' part come from!?"

"I mean Onee and that pretty-looking girl and this boy... Hm? This boy...he seems to match what Onee said before...something about 'good things' that happened."

"Y—Y—Y—You come over here. Over here, now!"

Taichi and Mihashi remained speechless as they watched the older Kiriyama dragged the younger into the shades.

After several minutes, the older Kiriyama came back alone. During those minutes it was only Taichi and Mihashi together. The air between them was very awkward.

"...What did you do?"

"Um... I used my elder sister's privilege... I'm exhausted."

Kiriyama responded to Taichi's question and sighed. She wiped off the sweat on her forehead.

Taichi thought he had heard sounds of crying back there... Maybe he was hearing things.

"She's not a bad child... But she can misinterpret things pretty badly sometimes."

"...Seems like it."

After that would be Kiriyaama's sibling matters. Hence Taichi refrained from any further comment.

In any case, life in the Kiriyaama household seemed rather eventful.

"Even if you'd sent Anzu-chan home, I'm still here you know! Will you stop treating me like I'm not here?"

Mihashi, who was apparently displeased from being ignored, puffed her cheeks. She actually looked kind of cute like that.

"Ah... About that..."

It took a fair bit of coaxing and persuading from Taichi and Kiriyaama before Mihashi finally reluctantly agreed to leave the topic for another day.

"...I've had enough. Sigh..."

Mihashi seemed exhausted as well, which was not surprising considering that she had been watching them since noon.

"Then, that's about it, Mihashi-san. Let's go, Taichi."

Kiriyaama seemed relieved as her expression loosened.

Meanwhile, Mihashi, who had been watching Kiriyaama the whole time, looked very upset for a moment.

Taichi, who was only able to watch from a bystander's point of view, could not understand what sort of emotion was held in that look.

"Say, Kiriyaama... What's that club you're participating right now?"

"Eh? Club? Er, it's called 'Cultural Research Club'... We usually just hang out in the club room, and do whatever we like..."

"Kiryama... You can at least tell the parts that sound like club activities."

"Oh, right. Er... We published a monthly article called «Cultural Research News». It mostly consists of news and gossips related to our interests... Wait a minute, isn't that the same as doing whatever we like?

"...You never thought of that?"

What had Kiriyama been thinking during their club activities all these times?

"Oh... So you're just playing around."

Mihashi said in a rather demeaning tone.

"I guess you can say that..."

"What's the purpose in that?"

Mihashi questioned Kiriyama.

"You say purpose... How am I supposed to..."

Kiryama's expression stiffened.

"Kiryama, have you been striving for anything lately?"

"I—I..."

Kiryama tried to come up with an answer, but failed. She remained silent.

"...Really, Kiriyama, what are you trying to achieve?"

"Achieve...for what..."

Kiryama smiled dubiously and self-mockingly. This seemed to have enraged Mihashi.

"You coward! Put your act together already!"

"Why... Why do I have to take the blame from you?"

Kiriyama seemed to be agitated by Mihashi's outburst and lost her temper.

"What happened to the Kiriyama who used to be cool and strong!?"

"Why are you bringing up the past me? What are you trying to say?"

"What I'm saying is, you are pale compared to how you used to be!"

"So what if I changed? I don't care about what happened in the past!"

"You say you don't care..."

Mihashi's expression became of someone who was deeply betrayed.

"Then...was that all a lie? That promise between you and me?"

"I said I don't know any promise you're talking about!"

As Kiriyama said that, Mihashi lowered her head as if she was about to cry.

"W—What..."

Mihashi's gesture somewhat alleviated Kiriyama's anger.

"Ugh..."

Mihashi bit her lips and suddenly threw her black jacket aside.

Taichi, who was just standing nearby, caught the jacket in the air.

"I'll wake you up... Fight me!"

Kiriyama looked surprised at first, but then a sneer flashed across her face.

It felt gloomy and dark.

"...Mihashi-san, have you ever beaten me in a fight?"

Kiriyama unbuttoned her duffel coat and took it off.

Once again, it was Taichi who caught the coat.

Since when did I become that kind of character? He thought.

It was somewhat embarrassing for a man.

"Taichi, referee."

"Un—Understood."

The two's aura was beyond the level where any ordinary people could intervene. Taichi figured he should just stay put and play his part as a proper witness.

"Then... Be—Begin!"

Right as Taichi announced the start, the two started moving.

The wind was blowing. The earth was trembling.

As Taichi thought he felt that, the two participants shrunk their distance in a blink of an eye.

Taichi had no idea what kind of exchange occurred before him.

However, the outcome was determined right away.

Mihashi Chinatsu kicked her right foot at Kiriyama Yui's head, and remained still on the spot.

It was a right upper kick halted right before it hit.

"...It normally wouldn't end like that."

Mihashi slowly lowered her foot.

"Weak."

Mihashi left that remark, and continued:

"What have you been doing this past three years?"

Kiriyama remained frozen on the spot.

"...I...because..."

Kiriyama was holding in her tears; her voice became choked from emotion.

"...It couldn't be helped!"

It was a cry of deepest sorrow——

"And?"

However, Mihashi's voice remained cold.

Kiriyama went through a lot of things. She was not at fault.

Yet, it was also true that Kiriyama had been stagnating all these time.

Depending on the situation, sometimes such simple fact would represent all of her.

No excuse would matter.

"If it couldn't be help, you can at least tell us the reason."

Mihashi said, but Kiriyama could only remain silent.

"In the end, you refuse to tell us anything... Gimme a break."

Mihashi snatched her jacket from Taichi and left the scene.

As they returned to the building, Nagase and Aoki, whom they thought would have returned to normal by then, were still in their one year-old and twelve-year old selves respectively.

"Sorry, it seemed I confused the time. We've actually got some time left."

Inaba apologized, which was a rare sight.

"So are you guys alright?"

"So far. But would you mind tell us in a bit the 'excuse' you mentioned earlier?"

"Alright, alright. However, even though we were seen, it's surprisingly not too difficult to gloss it over... But that's only because our witnesses only recognized Yui, and she wasn't affected by 'Time Regression' just then... By the way..."

Inaba gestured towards Yui.

"What's up with her? Why is she looking like it's the end of the world?"

Kiriyama was curling up gloomily in the corner.

"Uh, that's because..."

Just as Taichi was about to explain, Aoki(12) suddenly jump up from his chair.

"Don't be sad, Nana's sister! Oh... Wait, you're different person, I thought it was like that..."

"You're annoying! Who's Nishino Nana anyway!? I'm Kiriya Yui!"

Kiriya suddenly yelled.

"Ah... That's... I—I'm sorry... My bad..."

The shocked Aoki(12) squeezed out an apologize.

"...Eh? Ah, I didn't...!"

Kiriya was shocked upon realizing what she had done as she heard him apologized.

"No... I mean, I should be apologizing... I'm sorry, I shouldn't have yelled at you... It wasn't your fault... I'm really sorry."

"It's fine~"

Even though Aoki(12) said that, Kiriya kept apologizing.

Something was about to fall apart.

One could see the crack in it.

However, Taichi, who was unaffected by the phenomenon this time, was unable to feel what his companions were feeling.

Not to mention, these were private matters of those concerned, something an outsider could not tap into.

It was no longer possible to change the past.

He could not see the way forward.



+ + +

He became a child——Aoki Yoshifumi. And he once again mistook Kiriya Yui as Nishino Nana's sister in his child self.

Nana did not have a sister.

However, before he knew that, whenever he saw Yui, he would associate the sight with Nana's relative right away.

What an idiot! He wanted to hit himself in the face.

Okay, let's try that then.

Thud.

Ouch. Of course it hurts.

He had to admit though, they really looked alike.

Those eyes, those brows, their cheeks, and that light brown hair.

To say they were exactly alike would be an overstatement, but it really did make one wonder if they were related in blood.

He met Nishino Nana during around third or fourth grade.

How they met could be described as cheesy. He saw a girl being pestered by strange people and she seemed frightened. So he grabbed her and escaped. Something like that.

When he walked her home, it turned out that they live fairly close to each other, and Nana's parents seem to be pleased with him, so they started playing together on occasion.

His time with Nana were happy moments.

Nana seemed happy as well.

The two continued their relationship. Then in middle school, Nana confessed to him, so they started going out.

They called it going out, but it was nothing more than middle-schoolers' love. It wasn't exactly anything intimate or passionate.

They mostly just watched movies together, shopped together, or play at the theme park together.

They never even kissed. Hand holding was the best they could handle.

To say it was 'going out', it was really closer to 'being close friends.'

But, during that time, he really loved Nishino Nana.

Reverting back to his past self, remembering his past feelings, he could understand it clearly.

At the end of first year in middle school, Nana had to move due to her parents' work.

Just like during her confession, Nana was the one who suggested to break up.

She said, there was no way they could meet each other again.

Even though she wasn't moving out of the country, for a pair of thirteen year-old children, the distance of several hundred miles was already too much. It couldn't be helped.

That's how love is for middle-schoolers, isn't it? He thought.

What could a little brat do to commit to a long-distance relationship?

That was the story of Aoki Yoshifumi's first love.

He loved her.

Very much.

Very very much.

But that tale had ended.

It had ended—theoretically speaking.

Then, where did that feeling of 'love' go to? Was it still in his heart?

If it still remained...

He loved Kiriyama Yui.

He knew he loved her, there was no question about that.

And the reason being, as always... Instinct.

But... What defines instinct?

Why did it have to be Yui?

It couldn't be due to her looking like Nana right?

Was it that he was actually loving Nana since the beginning, and was only looking at her through Kiriya Yui?

No, no. It couldn't be.

How would that be possible?

He couldn't even remember things about Nana lately, he could be sure he wasn't thinking of her.

But what if it was his subconscious...

If it was him not long before, he would most likely laugh it off with "Why would I subconsciously think like that".

But now, he remembered that heated feeling that would melt his chest when he still loved Nana back then. It was the same as the feeling of him loving Yui right now. It was exactly because of that, he could not deny those feelings.

He was certain that his 'love' for Yui is stronger, because they were together all the time.

But, what if Nana was here?

Who would he 'love' then?

He could not even begin to imagine.

'Love' had no form.

'Love' could not be measured with numbers.

He had no idea what kind of chemical reaction will result in 'love'.

Being like that, did he have the right to claim who he 'love'?

Right now, he was unable to sprint, not even to walk.

He began to doubt himself, lose himself; he stopped moving forward.

Hereafter, could he still love Yui?

What did Yui think about him?

It may sound irresponsible. In fact, he felt terrible about it as well. But, he could not help but to think:

—*If only Yui can look at me once in the eyes...*

He had tried for a long time, proclaiming that he 'love' Yui.

He strove to express this feeling of 'love' to Yui.

He formally confessed to Yui, and did so many times.

How much of his feeling of 'love' was forwarded to her?

And how much of that filled Yui's heart?

And then, if she still would not accept him in the end, where would this feeling go?

Would it just drop on the floor? Would it rot and disappear?

He had always been approaching her head on.

But he never felt a direct respond to his feelings from her.

Of course, Yui would have her own thoughts or things to consider.

Therefore, in the end...

The question was if Yui anticipated his feelings for her at all.

If he stopped proclaiming his 'love' for Yui, this tale that might not even have begun between Aoki Yoshifumi and Kiriama Yui would end once and for all—
—It was simple as that, was it not?

Chapter 5 - New Year's Eve

The phenomenon continued even during the New Year's Eve.

Taichi and the others from the club could only gather once again at the abandoned apartment. Before they entered, they scouted the area to make sure that nobody else was watching.

"...She's late!"

Inaba hit the desk with a loud *bang*.

It was five minutes before twelve on the clock, but Nagase still hadn't arrive at the building.

If she didn't make it here before twelve and undergoes 'Time Regression'... it would become problematic.

"What she mean by 'I'll make it if I make it' anyway..."

Just as Inaba was about to continue her rant, the door flung open.

"Sorry, I'm late!"

Nagase barely made it into the room before twelve.

"You're too slow, you idiot!"

"Ahh~ My bad my bad, I got caught up with something!"

Nagase said cheerfully, but her hair was in rather bad shape and her eyes were swelling as well.

"Oi... Are you alright?" Taichi asked with concern.

"Didn't I say I only 'got caught up with something'? I'm fine!"

She seemed to be pushing herself.

The ones who were affected by 'Time Regression' today were Inaba and Kiriyaama.

The two's body shrunk slightly, their look became slightly more child-like. Also, Kiriyaama's hair became very short. She seemed to have reverted to her short-haired days.

They didn't change much, both seemed to be in their middle school age.

And so begins the day.

Just as Taichi thought that——

"Noooooooooooo!"

Kiriyaama, who was in the state of 'Time Regression', suddenly screamed.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

As Taichi tried to approach her, Kiriyaama whimpered and backed away.

"Taichi, move aside!"

Nagase pushed Taichi aside, and knelt before Kiriyaama.

"What's wrong, Yui? You okay?"

"There's... Boy... I... I..."

"Mm. I understand. It's okay, just relax, breathe, okay? Breathe."

Nagase proceeded to soothe a very shaken Kiriyaama.

"There now, there's nothing to be afraid of, okay? No one's gonna hurt you."

Nagase gently stroke Kiriyaama's back, and continued to comfort her for a while.

As they let the now calmed Kiriyaama(14) and Inaba(14) sat down on the chairs (they had verified their age), Taichi and the others sat at a distance a way from the two in the room.

Inaba(14) was reading quietly. On the other hand, Kiriyaama(14) was not doing anything particular but sitting on her chair, and would occasionally peek at Taichi and Aoki. She was like a scared kitten.

"...That's kinda overreacting."

Taichi murmured. Nagase heard him and raised her eyebrow in slight anger.

"Taichi, you shouldn't be saying that."

"I—I know... But, she wouldn't even be able to go to school like that, would she?"

"Indeed... Could it be that she was reverted to the state right after she was 'almost assaulted by a man'?"

"So that's what the phenomenon's doing this time... Reverting back to your past state, undergoing what is normally impossible, having the phenomenon confuse your memories and feelings... I guess these are the kind of things we're dealing with."

"Whoa, you sounded like Inaban for a moment there, Taichi."

"Don't say that. I'll be embarrassed."

"...Why would you be embarrassed?"

"N—No! I mean, it sounded like you're saying I'm smart and all. I wasn't implying anything else..."

"Haha~ You're too worked up, Taichi~"

Nagase seemed to have predicted this since the start. Her chatter had greatly lightened the mood.

Although when Taichi first saw her today, Nagase didn't seem to feel well at all. He hoped she was alright.

"Aoki, what do you think?"

Nagase tried to start a conversation with Aoki, who had been quiet the whole time.

"...Eh? Ahh, yeah... Er..."

"You ain't even thinking of nothing!"

Taichi watched as Nagase jabbed at Aoki with her fake-Kansai dialect. He felt there was indeed something wrong with Aoki.

—Normally, Aoki would be the first one to react towards Kiriama(14)'s screaming.

"...Stop freaking out like that. You're distracting me."

Inaba(14) said to Kiriama(14), her eyes still fixated on her book.

"Eh... Uh... I... Sorry."

"Hmph. Aren't you gonna do anything? You're just wasting time sitting there."

"R—Right... Then... Can I try reading that..."

Kiriyama(14) tried to pick up one of the books from the pile in front of Inaba(14). These books were prepared in advance by Inaba, who said "In case I reverted to my more recent age, give these to me and I should stay put."

"I'm fine with that. Can you understand that book though?"

The books in front of Inaba were a bit too advanced for middle-schoolers.

"Uh, probably not..."

Inaba(14) snorted and returned to her reading.

Kiriyama(14), on the other hand, curled up and continued to stare at the floor.

Taichi and Nagase watched them from afar.

Note: Aoki went to the store for the bathroom.

"Wow... Inaban from not long ago is so harsh."

"She isn't a bad person at heart, but she really can be very cold."

"...Even so, you won't think of Inaban badly right?"

Nagase asked as she looked straight into Taichi's eyes.

"...Of course. These are things from the past, not to mention I really don't believe her to be a bad person at all."

Taichi answered as he, too, looked back straight towards Nagase. She smiled in response.

"Good."

Nagase looked satisfied.

Even though it was always like that, Taichi couldn't at all figure out what she was really thinking.

He always thought, if only he could understand Nagase better as a person.

"Today's New Year's Eve right? This entire year... so much had happened."

Nagase said sentimentally.

"Too much, too frequently. 'Personality Exchange' plus 'Desire Unleash'..."

"Say, Taichi, what was the 'most remarkable event that happened this year' for you?"

"The most remarkable event you say... If I have to generalize... I guess I'd say the encounter with «Heartseed»."

Taichi answered, and Nagase made a disappointed "Ehhhh?" sound. She raised her eyebrow unhappily.

"What? What were you expected me to answer?"

"In situations like this..."

Nagase grinned.

"...You should be answering 'our encounter' you know!"

It was an innocent, pure and bright smile; for a moment, Taichi had forgotten to breathe.

The smile was so bright it could be described as the life-nurturing sun.

"O—Our encounter... N—Nagase you're talking really boldly..."

The room was cold, yet Taichi was drenching in sweat.

"Eh? Our encounter... Ah! No! I—I don't mean it like that!"

Nagase waved her hands in panic.

"No, I mean I do mean some of it, but I really wanted to mean it like 'meeting everyone in CRC.'"

Nagase's cheek turned bright red.

"Ahh... I guess. Sorry, I jumped to conclusion..."

Taichi was embarrassed at his misinterpretation, and lowered his head.

But Nagase seemed to have a different say about it.

"Uh, but, Taichi is of course part of what I meant too! More like, if I have to choose someone from the CRC, I'd probably choose Taichi... Wo—Wo—Wa...!?"

Nagase seemed confused.

"I—I get it! Anyway, calm down."

"G—Gotja!"

And then, Taichi peeked at Inaba(14) and KiriYama(14) to check on them...

Only to find them sitting completely still staring at Taichi and Nagase.

As they caught on Taichi's eye, Inaba(14) smirked and again returned to her reading; KiriYama on the other hand averted her eyes.

"Ahem~ Now that I think of it..."

Nagase cleared her throat and changed the topic.

"Normally we should be spending New Year's Eve and New Year's Day with our family. Is Taichi alright with coming out?"

"...Of course my family is upset at me not being home during these times, since I'm suppose to help with New Year's clean up. That's why I try to finish as much house work as possible before coming out at noon."

The more concerning problem was, his sister was in an increasingly bad mood.

When he tried to leave home today, his sister angrily complained about Taichi being out all day, not playing with her, and not doing her homework (even though Taichi insisted that she should be 'doing her own homework'. Yet she answered: "Onii-chan that doesn't help do homework is no Onii-chan!") Hopefully she wasn't only acknowledging her brother for personal conveniences... Hopefully.)

"Speaking of which, what about Nagase? Is your mother alone at home?"

"No, not now anyway... Ah! Never mind never mind. You're right, Mom's alone at home."

"Huh? Which is it?"

"Ahhh it's nothing. It's just my Mom. So, er... I really can't say..."

Nagase's expression suddenly turned sombre. Her cheerful outlook vanished without a trace.

"I'm... worried."

"...I see... I really do hope it will end soon."

Taichi said, and felt himself being very irresponsible at the same time.

He knew who the 'true mastermind' of this phenomenon was, yet he was not able to do anything.

"But we could still go home at night... We can still pass the year with our family without any interference from the outside."

Nagase said determinedly with a decisive look in her eyes.

Why is she saying that so determinedly? Taichi thought in puzzlement.

It was five o'clock. The 'Time Regression' phenomenon ended for the day.

The two felt a slight discomfort for a moment, and then Inaba(14) and Kiriyaama(14) returned to normal.

"...Ugh! Ah, it's my turn today? How old was I reverted to?"

Taichi answered Inaba's question:

"You were fourteen. By the way Kiriyaama was fourteen as well... Kiriyaama?"

Kiriyaama held her arms against shoudler tightly as if she was about to freeze to death.

Her face, half-covered by her chestnut-brown hair, appeared pale white.

"Are you alright? Yui!"

Nagase rushed to Kiriyaama's side. Kiriyaama responded with a shaken voice:

"...I... remember... everything... clearly... I..."

Kiriyaama trembled and said.

+ + +

After dinner, Kiriya Yui left words of "I'll come down later tonight" and proceeded to shut herself in her room.

Her mother asked: "Are you feeling ill?"

Yui answered that she was just a bit tired.

Her mother asked again: "Would you like some toshikoshi soba for midnight snack tonight?"

This time Yui answered: "I'll come down for it later."

Though concerned, her mother watched silently as she saw Yui head upstairs.

Yui closed the door of her room and fell on her bed.

Mother is being too gentle to me, she thought.

Now that she thought about it, her mother used to be stricter. Even though she'd still scold her whenever Yui did something wrong, in the past her mother would also scold her whenever Yui was being irresponsible.

Yui thought she had forgotten how her mother used to be like.

Everything was changed on that day.

Yui remembered many things.

Including those she refused to look at, and those she wanted to forget.

When she was almost assaulted, she felt painful.

But compared to that, remembering her past self was even more painful.

She once had a dream.

It was a dream that was grand and naive, like a silly child's dream.

It would be a blatant lie to say that she had already forgotten that dream.

She had never forgotten it, but she stashed it in a box, and avoided looking at it. And then, when she realized it again, the box was already covered in thick dust.

Even with 'Time Regression', where she was forced to recall her once undeniable, bright and glorious dream, Yui still refused to look at it.

However, it could no longer be hidden.

——*I want to be Number One.*

She used to think that naively. She believed as such and continued to advance in her karate practice.

What does 'Number One' suppose to mean anyway? Yui mocked at herself.

To be Number One on a tournament? Of Japan? Of the world? Or was it one that exceeds the boundary of genders?

She never once thought of these.

Because there was no such thing as limit.

Number One was simply, Number One.

She only kept advancing.

She was 'strong'.

It was not 'strong' in the sense of physique or skill.

It was 'strong' in a more general sense, and she would achieve it with her own hands.

She had lost before, but it was never the end. She would stand up again, and face the next challenge with everything she had got, no matter how many times she fell.

But now, she was weak.

Ever since that incident, she had become stagnant. She became so weak she was unable to walk on her own. If she fell, she could never get up again.

What does she have now? She thought. What else could she do?

Nothing.

Kiryama Yui had nothing, and could achieve nothing.

She had received many things from her companions.

But she had nothing to return.

She once made a promise with someone.

A promise with the girl whose name was Mihashi Chinatsu.

The two had always run into each other at the local tournament finals. Yui would always be the first place, while Mihashi would be the second. Needless to say, Mihashi wasn't very happy about that.

The school of karate which Yui was part of did not organized national tournaments for middle-schoolers. Therefore, after Mihashi moved, the two never got to spar again.

Mihashi, who rarely talked to Yui even when they met during tournaments, before she moved, once told Yui shyly: "Once we enter high school, we'll fight again in the national tournament! I won't lose to you next time."

She used to think Mihashi disliked her, but it didn't seemed the case. And the 'national tournament' part seemed to imply that Mihashi acknowledged Yui's skill. This made Yui very happy.

She promised to her.

She swore it many times, that she would keep that promise.

Mihashi must had valued their promise, yet Yui had failed to keep it——She did not even remember it.

She had given up her dream.

By leaving everything behind.

Living under the shelter of her friends and families.

Now, however, even the the one who claimed to love her, who believed in her, was no longer saying that 'he loves her'.

Who was there left to acknowledge her worth?

Nobody.

She was worthless.

A pointless nobody.

A replacement that could be substituted any time.

Yes, just a replacement.

To Aoki, she was Nishino Nana's...

But was it wrong to be one of the dime and dozen?

She was not exactly anyone great in particular.

How many great people were there in the world anyway?

She was definitively different compared to those people.

There was no point trying.

It was something that could not be helped.

She would fail no matter how much she would try.

So she stopped pushing herself.

She had tried hard, hadn't she?

She had enough.

So empty... it was infuriating.

An empty shell.

Kiriyama Yui was an empty, hollow shell.

She was just a shell. Yet her tear flowed as though she was human.

Chapter 6 - Goodbye

A new year begins.

For the ordinary people, this was a significant moment. But it obviously didn't matter to *those people*.

On the New Year Day, Nagase, Kiriyaama, and Aoki were all affected by 'Time Regression'.

Even though they were caught in such abnormality, it was humiliating just to think that they were basically forced to adjust their lives to the phenomenon... Therefore, under Inaba's insistence, they went to their Hatsumode. It did not end well.

"To think we ended up like this on the first day of the year... I don't even wanna think about what's gonna happen to us for the rest of the year."

Inaba, who was next to Taichi, remarked on their way back to the abandoned apartment from the shrine.

"I think I'm beginning to feel it too... both in the physical and mental sense..."

It was not the first time where three of them were transformed by 'Time Regression'; there was even one occasion where everyone but Taichi were affected (fortunately, the age of all four of them after being reverted were on the older side of the scale). For that reason, Taichi had become extremely worn out.

He had never felt such melancholy on a New Year's Day.

Taichi sincerely pray that, this was not their luck sign for the rest of the year.



The next morning, Taichi felt his sister approaching him from the stairs behind him just as he was getting ready to leave.

Taichi, who was fully expecting to be lectured "Are you going out again" by her, prepared himself and turned around.

Apparently, he should have prepared himself for something else.

The being that did not belong to this reality.

«Number Two», with his sister's body, was standing right there.

"...It has been a while."

Taichi forgot to breathe for a moment.

Why did he come here?

Why possess his sister again?

"Are you tired?"

"...Tired... Very tired, can you please stop it?"

It had become increasingly difficult for Taichi and the others to excuse themselves from their families.

Taichi was beginning to submit to his accumulating stress.

At this rate, he and the other members would eventually get caught in extremely dangerous situations.

Even though one could argue that it had already happened.

"Will not stop. Because there is still no answer yet."

«Number Two» paused for a moment.

"...But he already found out. Shall it end? But, just a little more..."

"End?"

Was he willing to end this phenomenon? This was exactly what he was hoping for, right?

"Hey... Are you planning to end it, «Number Two»?"

"...Maybe."

«Number Two»'s flat tone was discouraging for Taichi.

Make up your mind, he thought.

"Something will happen soon, what will it be? Maybe I will find out?"

Find out what?

"But... very tiring."

"Of course it's tiring. But what are you referring to that is 'tiring'?"

"...You will know if you observe the inside of the heart... very tiring. Have you not noticed?"

"No..."

Taichi knew how shaken and exhausted everyone must be. He was also fully aware of the potential outbreak regarding Kiriya and Aoki's relationship.

The very relationship that was supposed to be improving due to Aoki's dedication towards Kiriya. Even from a bystander's point of view, it was painful to watch as their relationship was mercilessly being torn apart. Taichi wanted to do something for them.

But in the end, it still depended on how the two perceived it and what their course of action would be.

Of course, Taichi tried to talk to both of them and insisted it was only temporary due to the strange phenomenon, in hopes that they would not over think it and thus patching their relationship.

"Very tiring... very tiring..."

«Number Two» smirked.

A chill that was worse than any kind that he experienced in winter, ran through Taichi's body.

«Number Two» smiled dubiously, and vanished without a trace.



Taichi met Kiriya and Aoki as he exit the station.

The three walked to their destination, with Taichi walking between the other two.

While there was some conversation going on, Kiriya and Aoki had not talked directly to each other at all.

Taichi was not exactly a good chatter. Hence, their conversation seemed plain under this awkward atmosphere.

Then, as they were about to arrive the reconstruction site, a familiar figure approached them from the front.

She wore her hair in ponytail and maintained a keen aura——It was Mihashi Chinatsu.

"You're coming here again."

Mihashi stopped a few feet before them.

"And with different members too, but... that boy is always there. So you two are indeed dating, aren't you?"

"...We're not dating."

Kiriya's voice was barely audible.

Mihashi's expression turned puzzled for a moment.

"Who?" Aoki asked, and Taichi answered: "Kiriya's old acquaintance, the one I told you about before."

"Whatever, it doesn't matter. Say, can you please tell me why you've given up karate? I have to find out... something doesn't feel right if I don't."

Compared to their previous meetings, Mihashi seemed a lot calmer this time; he could see that she was trying to be friendlier.

It seems they can finally converse properly, Taichi thought.

However——

"...That's none of Mihashi-san's business."

Kiriyama cast her face aside and said flatly.

"W—Why are you talking like that..."

"Why what? I thought that was normal."

"I'm just trying to ask you a question."

"You're annoying."

Kiriyama rejected Mihashi completely.

"T—That's because you won't answer me..."

"...I gave up karate. Isn't that good enough an answer?"

"But our promise..."

"Promise, promise. That was far in the past, will you stop bringing it up?"

It was obvious that Mihashi was deeply hurt by that.

Kiriyama kept her head low, her face remained emotionless.

"Er, sorry to interrupt. I know it's odd for me to say this but..."

Surprisingly, Aoki intervened.

"Yui, shouldn't you at least hear her out?"

Even though Aoki had only been peeking at Kiriyama the whole time, he still stepped up and tried to directly correct her.

Kiriyama was speechless for a moment.

"W—What...? Who are you to say that to me?"

Kiriyama's face was slowly turning red from anger.

"Uh, but you need to confront her feelings properly——"

"I don't want to be lectured by some irresponsible guy like you!"

Kiriyama shouted in rage.

"Irresponsible... I don't want to be called that by Yui."

Aoki's was displeased. His expression became tense.

"How... How are you even able to say that?"

"That's the truth!"

"You're... You're... just some guy who's saying he loves me because he's seeing his ex through me!"

Kiriyama screamed and seemed to be hurt by her own words.

She looked as if she was about to break into tears.

Aoki, too, looked incredibly hurt.

Despite her breaking, Kiriyama did not stop there:

"Take some responsibility will you? ... Be more responsible!"

"I am following my own ways... and living my life responsibly!"

"You are not!"

"I am!"

As if a bomb was triggered, there seemed to be no stopping to the two's violent argument.

"You never thought about anything anyway did you? You're just brushing aside everything aren't you? You've never taken any responsibility at all!"

"That's enough of you, saying things like responsibility since the start, Yui! You're the one who needs to be more responsible!"

"What did you say!?"

"You've never faced anything seriously! Even till now, you're still the same!"

"I... am not..."

"Then tell me, what have you ever seriously done!?"

"That's because... I... because..."

"Don't tell me 'because' or 'but'!"

"I... I can't... can't help it..."

"Can you really not help it?"

"Augh... but..."

"The one who's been making excuses was in fact Yui yourself, was it not!?"

"I..."

Kiriyama was struck speechless and covered her face.

He probably should have done so earlier, but Taichi stepped in.

"B—Both of you, calm down, Aoki... Kiriyama as well. Are you alright?"

Without saying it towards anyone in particular, Aoki apologized with "Sorry" and proceeded ahead towards the abandoned building.

Suddenly, Taichi and Mihashi's eyes connected.

"Uh..."

Mihashi averted her eyes and looked to be at loss. She turned around.

"I should probably be going..."

Mihashi left the scene as she said that.

Taichi did not know what to say to her, and could only watch her lonely figure disappear into distance.

Sounds of Kiriya sobbing came to him.

"Kiriya, please don't cry..."

Taichi said and extended his hand—but quickly put it down again.

Kiriya would react negatively towards any physical contact with guys.

Taichi did not know if she noticed what he did.

But the next moment, she collapsed on her knees.

She did not make any sound, only quietly wiped off her tears.

"O—Oi, Kiriya..."

They were both hurt, and they hurt each other.

Taichi was anguished. The pain was tearing him up from the inside.

He wanted to help, but he did not know how to heal their wounds nor stop them from hurting each other again.

Taichi——He was powerless.

Even though 'he' said it was going to end, the 'Time Regression' phenomenon still took place that day.

Nagase became six year-old, Inaba also became six year-old, while Aoki became fourteen year-old.

As soon as he was reverted, Aoki(14) talked to Kiriyama right away.

"You wouldn't happen to be... Nishino Nana-san's relative would you?"

That moment, Taichi thought Kiriyama would break down.

But Kiriyama only held her chest with her right hand and bit her lip, as if she was trying to hold something in.

"... No. I am... Kiriyama Yui."

Kiriyama said in a broken voice, but no tear could be seen.

"Ah, I'm sorry. You are Kiriyama-san. Understood."

Aoki(14) grinned innocently.

Nagase(6) and Inaba(6) were both obedient children. There were no trouble in taking care of them. Taichi could even leave them to the care of Aoki(14) without worry.

On the other hand, even though Aoki(14) looked a bit frivolous at times, he took his task to heart and took good care of the six year-old children.

"Seems Aoki from that time was not much different than from now..."

Taichi murmured to himself. But he quickly stopped as he worried it might upset Kiriyaama.

"Hey, Taichi."

"Oh, what's up?"

Kiriyaama gazed at Taichi sombrely.

"If I... If I say I love Taichi, what will you do?"

Taichi's mind instantly went blank.

"...W—What!? Why? What do you mean?"

"I love you, Taichi."

"Hold on! Please hold on a minute! T—That would be very problematic!"

Taichi was completely panic-stricken.

Kiriyaama looked away. Her chestnut-brown hair covered the side of her face, so Taichi was unable to tell her expression.

"...Suppose somebody confessed to you like that."

Phew, it was just a supposition, Taichi wished she wouldn't scare him like that.

Not to mention, that example was...

"If the person who confessed stopped saying that he loves you, then, what should the person who received the confession do?"

It was a very honest and straightforward question.

Taichi was pondering what to answer her, but in the end he decided he could only answer it like this:

"It... depends on what that person think, does it not?"

"I suppose you're right."

Kiriyama murmured and did not say another word.

At five o'clock, Nagase and the other two returned to normal.

As soon as the girls changed back to their proper attire, Kiriyama said "I have to get home early tonight" and left the room.

'Time Regression' had ended for the day, and the atmosphere of the room felt unusually heavy.

The light in the room seemed dimmer than usual.

"...What happened? I didn't get the chance to ask this morning."

Inaba inquired Taichi.

"When we were on our way here in the morning, we ran into Mihashi-san again. Then after a bit of talking, Aoki and Kiriyama started arguing..."

"Was it bad?"

Nagase came over and asked.

"Yea, it was. Kiriyama cried..."

"I see..."

Nagase murmured, her eyes lowered.

"But isn't that like couples fighting though? Not to mention, the usually straightforward Aoki suddenly stopping dead like that..."

Nagase continued after Inaba:

"...Not much we can do about it."

Aoki dug his face into his arm on the table.

The gap between Kiriya and Aoki was growing wider and wider.

If it continues to grow, it may never be mended.

The two had come this far with their feelings of each other.

Even from a bystander's point of view, Taichi could tell the two only needed a little bit more before being able to connect their feelings.

If there had not been this phenomenon, would it have a different outcome?

Or was this outcome an inevitable fate for them two?

Please don't let it be that—Taichi hoped in his heart.

It would probably be unreasonable to meddle with other people's affairs.

But Taichi had been watching them the whole time, hence he knew very well how much Aoki loved Kiriya.

Taichi would not allow such feelings to burn out before it even got to blossom.

Compared to not doing anything and regretting later, he'd rather try and take action and see what would happen.

Not to mention, it is easy to get lost when one is alone. Working it out together is a much better option. He had already learned that first hand.

Taichi approached Aoki.

"Hey... Taichi, that's... their private matter, don't you think?"

Inaba said to Taichi.

It was true that it was their private matter.

He thought of that too...

"But, aren't we friends?"

Even though he didn't know how far he should go.

Taichi stood in front of Aoki.

"...Aoki, is this really alright for you?"

Aoki was still leaning his face on the desk.

"I'm not sure what's really going on, but... this isn't like you at all."

"...What would I be like?"

Aoki replied in a low, hoarse tone.

"What would you be... Hm, should I say, you would be much more straightforward?"

"Straightforward..."

"Don't Aoki love Yui any more?"

Nagase pinpointed right at the heart of the problem.

Taichi's eyes connected with hers, only to see Nagase returning a tranquil smile at him.

He felt they were sharing the same feeling.

"That's not it... I'm not too sure myself either..."

"You say you're not sure..."

Nagase raised her eyebrow.

"...My mind is a mess right now... It feels like... I'm on the verge of remembering something important..."

Ahhh—— Inaba let out a loud sigh and came over.

"I had decided that... I would never interfere with other people's relationship. I've already failed once before and got myself yelled at by a certain somebody."

Inaba scratched her head and glanced at Nagase.

"So I won't be saying much, but I think... you're simply 'over thinking' it."

"...Over thinking?"

Aoki jolted.

"Y—you say he's over thinking? The Inaban who'd been hiding behind her logic and yelling at Aoki for being stupid, is now saying that!?"

"Don't be so surprised, Iori. I can change too. I mean... now I know the power of love."

Inaba said with an expression of a girl in love.

The smile on her was captivating.

"I—Inaban, slipping in stuff like that is cheating!"

"Is not! Compared to your 'telepathy' with him all the time, mine's nothing!"

...In this kind of scenario, Taichi had no idea what to do. Where was that guidebook when he needed it? He should probably consult Watase some time.

"...What do... you guys think I should do?"

Nobody could answer Aoki's question.

"That's entirely up to you, is it not?"

Inaba said.

"Anyway... You're not the type who'd be walking in circles here."

"I know right? Aoki's suppose to be the type who would charge head on."

"It might sound odd, but I kinda like your carefree lifestyle."

Inaba, Nagase and Taichi said respectively.

"Walking in circles... Charging head on... Carefree... Oh!"

Aoki raised his head suddenly.

"...I... forgot to live carefree!"

"...I didn't know you can forget such a thing."

Taichi remarked under his breath.

"I know... Why am I all worked up? ... That's not right... I'd made that decision back then... I've came through all the way like that..."

Aoki stood up with a determined gesture.

"I'm going to M-ken^[5]."

""Huh?""

His sudden decision baffled the other three.

"I'm saying, I'm going to M-ken, and I'm going right now."

"No, wait. How did you come up with that decision? Also, what you mean by 'going now'?" Taichi inquired.

"I'm going to see Nishino Nana."

There wasn't a shred of hesitation in Aoki's eyes.

"Oi, what are you talking about? From here to M-ken, there's no way you can make it back tonight."

Inaba pointed out the problem.

"Yea, that's why I'm going tonight, and coming back tomorrow."

"I don't know how you plan to go, but the traffic during the New Year is terrible! And if you don't make it back before twelve tomorrow..."

If Aoki got reverted by 'Time Regression' on the streets, it would be problematic.

"I know... but I still have to go."

Aoki said straightforwardly and showed no sign of giving in.

"Pfft... Hey, Taichi, you started it, so you take responsibility."

"Inaba, can we let him go, please?"

"Gah! I completely forgot that you'd be the last one on earth to stop him!"

This might be a stupid idea, but if this was Aoki's answer, Taichi wanted to give him a chance.

"I... must go, in order to move forward. So please, Inaba."

"If you take the bullet train, you can reach M-ken no problem. But considering the time to do other things, I just can't be sure if there's enough time..."

Inaba was still hesitating. So Nagase interrupted and asked:

"Why does Aoki want to see Nishino Nana-san?"

Nagase's question always cut straight to the point.

"To confirm my feelings."

His words sound as if he was taking a holy oath.

"Eh? Amazing, how did Aoki became so manly!? That's scary!"

"Can you not say it like you saw a ghost, Iori-chan?"

"Anyway... Inaban, after all that, will the Inaban who learned of the power of love still try to stop him?"

"Ugh... I guess... But,"

Inaba was about to give her consent, but started hesitating again right away.

"Why not, Inaba-chan?"

"What if... it turned out differently than we thought? ... What will you do?"

The mood became tense.

It was a scenario which Taichi never thought of.

"Or are you claiming that, the outcome will definitely be... what we wished for?"

Aoki would normally assert that it would not be the case, but——

"I don't know how it will turn out to be honest. Which is exactly why I must confirm it."

It was a readied look on Aoki's face, telling that he was readied to face any outcome.

"However, even if it really does turned out differently, even if I... "

Aoki showed sign of hesitation for the first time since the conversation started.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His lips were slightly quivering.

"Even if I have to... leave the CRC for this... I will stay true to my way."

He concluded valiantly.

"That's because, it's my way of life."

Taichi was awe-stricken.

When will he ever catch up to Aoki?

After hearing that from Aoki, Inaba finally loosened.

"Haha... Nice one. Who's gonna be able to stop you now?"

"Does that mean you agree now, Inaba?"

"Ah, yeah..."

Inaba said and sighed.

"However, just in case, Taichi, since we can almost be certain that you're immune to 'Time Regression', it's better to have you go along with him."

"...Alright. Leave it to me."

The stagnated one finally began to move.

They could feel it clearly.

Taichi didn't think that he pointed the direction or anything egotistical like that.

But, if he could at least contribute something in that, Taichi would be happy about it.

Things that could not be achieved alone, if there were somebody to help push one forward, it would sometimes become much simpler.

Which is the reason why, people would always want to travel along with others.

"Alright! Now that we've decided, let's get going! I can't stop now! Run, Taichi!"

"Wa—Wait... Eh? Speaking of which, the fare..."

"You deal with that, Taichi." Inaba said.

"You can do it, Taichi." Nagase said.

"You guys are so strict and mean at this kind of stuff!"

Darn, Aoki aside, at least help divide the bullet train fare! Taichi thought, even though he could withdraw some money from savings.

Not to mention... How was he going to explain his staying out for the night to his family?

"You forgot this, Aoki."

"Ah, crap. Thanks, Iori-chan."

Aoki caught the baggage that Nagase threw.

Taichi opened the door first and went outside.

At the end of the corridor, he thought he caught a glimpse of what looked like chestnut-brown hair disappearing by the stairs.

On the bullet train, Aoki started talking about something from his past.

"When I was in my second year of middle school, there was a girl in my class who died from a car accident."

"I see... so Aoki studied in that middle school..."

Although he was not sure of the details, Taichi had heard about that incident.

"We weren't exactly close or anything, but since it was somebody near me, I was pretty shocked. At the time I thought, we human really don't know when we're gonna die."

Aoki looked outside the window of the train.

Thick and heavy cloud could be seen in the evening sky, which made the sky felt even heavier.

"That girl started going to cram school pretty early and worked really hard in order to get into a better high school. She prepared everything for the future, yet none of that mattered once she was dead. Don't get me wrong though, I'm not saying her efforts were for nothing."

Aoki added.

"Anyway, it's important to prepare for your future. But I think it's also important to enjoy your present."

Indeed, Taichi could sympathize with that.

"Which was why I've decided then: I'm going to enjoy my life at its fullest. That way, even if I die, I'd have lived my life at its fullest. And if I manage to live a hundred years old, wouldn't that equate to me having lived a life several times better than most?"

"So... this is Aoki's way of life?"

"That's right, this is my way of life. I don't know if it's right or wrong, but I would like to believe that it is, and I've been sticking by that principal."

Taichi never really gave any thought about his way of life.

"To achieve that, I will give it everything I've got, and I will never forget it. Alright, serious topic ends here!"

Aoki said like a naive child, though in Taichi's eyes, Aoki was the most mature among Taichi's friends.

The two got off the bullet train, and took the railroad based on information they found on the internet, then switched to a taxi and arrived near their destination.

They felt it was inappropriate to have a taxi driving around the neighborhood, so they decided to go on foot.

The time was almost ten thirty at night.

"The weather's so cold! Is this how it's like up the north?"

Aoki shouted with his teeth clattering from the cold.

"We might freeze to death at this rate... let's hurry... I mean it seriously."

There are no better words to describe it than 'cutting wind and piercing cold'.

The two searched their way through the fairly new and quiet neighborhood, based on the address they got on the New Year card that Nishino Nana had sent to Aoki.

"Say... How come you don't have her contact information?"

"Well, I didn't have a cell phone back then, and I never really asked for her phone number at her new home."

"Ah... I see."

Taichi responded while shivering in the cold.

Suddenly, Taichi realized that there were no light coming out of several homes.

It seemed too early for people to be sleeping.

Hold on, the season at the moment...

"...Oi, oi, Aoki, is Nishino-san's parent's hometown in this area?"

"No, I remember it isn't."

"Then... it's New Year right now, is there a chance that they would travel to their hometown for the season?"

"Ack..."

A chill went through their bodies, but it had nothing to do with the cold air.

"I—It should be fine! Not that I have proof or anything."

"...Not saying it's bad to be optimistic, but one day it will bite you back..."

In this world, being carefree does not work out all the time.

"Never mind that, I think we're almost... It should be somewhere around here..."

"Hm? Now that I think of it, once you see her... Aoki, what are you gonna do? And what should I do?"

Aoki suddenly stopped on his track. Taichi, too, stopped talking.

Isn't that a little too dramatic? Taichi thought.

It was as if fated to be.

A black Sedan stopped in front of a two-story house.

A girl wearing white long down coat walked out of the vehicle.

Her had a short hair cut, and seemed a little taller than Kiriyama.

The girl noticed the two and her eyes narrowed for a moment, which then widened in bewilderment.

She first peeked back inside the car and whispered something to the person in it. Then she sprinted towards where the two were standing.

"Y—Yoshifumi..."

Her voice was clear like birds singing.

Taichi felt he was interfering, so he backed off several steps.

Snow started falling.

"Why... Why are you here? I was surprised."

The puzzled girl——Nishino Nana, glanced at Taichi as well.

"Sorry for showing up here all of the sudden. But I really have to see you."

"Eh? That's..."

"Nana"

"Y—Yes..."

"I really loved you, Nana. But now, I have someone that I love more."

The snow fell gently, and landed on the remains of the melted snow on the ground.

The surrounding was so quiet, one could almost hear the the snow whisper.

"I see."

Soon after, Nishino replied simply and softly, and smiled.

It was a smile that expressed a certain sadness, but at the same time, happiness.

"...Sorry. I showed up in front of you all of the sudden and blabbered nonsenses to you..."

"No, it's fine. Thanks for coming all the way to see me."

Then the two fell into silent, as if they did not know what to say, or anything that was needed to say.

Nishino's eyes fell on Taichi once again.

The two nodded in acknowledgement.

"Who is that over there? Eh... Don't tell me... The person Yoshifumi love now is—"

"No way!"

"Of course not!"

Crap, even though she was a stranger, Taichi could not help but to jab at her statement!

"Ahaha, I thought so. Anyway, what are you going to do after this? It's cold out here, would you like to warm yourselves at my place for a bit?"

"Ah, thanks but no thanks. We have to hurry back as well."

Even though they did not have a returning bus plan, Aoki still insisted.

"In that case..."

"This hair."

Nishino ran her fingers through her chestnut-brown hair.

Then her fingers hover near her shoulder where the hair didn't reach.

"I cut it near the end of year before."

A sudden gust blew and disarranged Nishino's hair.

The moment was so beautiful, one would want to capture it in a drawing and save it.

"I see."

Aoki replied simply, and scratched his head a little abruptly.

"Alright, we should be going. We should talk more the next time we meet again."

Aoki said cheerfully. Nishino nodded in response as well.

Then, Aoki turned around.

"Let's head back, Taichi."

"Are you done?"

"Done."

Aoki walked pass Taichi, and strode forward. Taichi hurried suit and caught up by his side.

"Good bye."

Words of farewell came softly from behind.

Aoki raised his hand in response.

He did not look back.

+ + +

Aoki Yoshifumi trod briskly on the melting snow.

Keeping up next to him was Yaegashi Taichi.

Taichi was a nice person who was willing to accompany Aoki in his silly, reckless quest.

"Okay! It'll be bad if we don't hurry, let's run, Taichi."

"What!?"

Taichi asked in bewilderment.

"Charge! I'm gonna leave you behind!"

"W—Where are we going? Shouldn't we call the taxi company we heard from the driver earlier first? ...Hey, wait for me!"

Aoki ignored Taichi behind him and sprinted forward.

Taichi was a nice person. Even if he kept complaining, he would always catch up in the end.

Thus, Aoki was able to charge on ahead without worry.

Aoki wondered: Why was he lost before?

Why did he not notice such a simple truth?

'Love' is 'love', and only 'love'.

And that was good enough. That was all there was.

There was no point in bashing his head thinking about it.

Besides, a 'love' relationship should be based on feelings, not the brain.

No reason, no cause, no logic, no theory.

If it could be explained by all of that, then 'love' dilemma wouldn't exist at all.

He could only follow his feelings, so he had to feel it with all his body and soul.

He must trust his own feelings.

Why did he doubt his own feelings?

He doubted his passionate feelings of 'love'.

He doubted himself, and started thinking without moving a step.

Would that realize his feelings?

It would be impressive if anyone could do that, but he knew he couldn't.

If he didn't keep running, keep feeling, then he would never realize his own feelings.

Anyway, the world was already full of things that troubled the mind.

All kinds of troublesome, pestering things.

There would certainly be times where he must arm himself with thoughts.

But, if he covered himself completely in armor, wouldn't that stop him from being able to feel?

If he increased the stimulant around him because he could not feel it properly, wouldn't his feelings grow dull?

Once dulled, he stopped knowing things. He would be sucked into this unfeeling vortex, and begin to lose sight of things that were truly important.

That kind of life is just too dull.

The most amazing things in life should be more simple and more pure.

It would be good enough as long as he could find 'that'——something that was enough to be acknowledged by others.

At least he would like to believe so.

Therefore, he must keep running forward.

Stop pushing problems aside.

Pretending that it was somebody else's fault equates to making excuses and no longer running forward.

That was not the way to be.

If there are feelings that could not be conveyed, then keep shouting until they are conveyed.

It is that pure.

So pure it is silly.

Yes, he should be sillier, and he could be more childish too.

When he was reverted to a child, he realized things only a child could realize.

Of course, he couldn't stay a child all the time. There would be times where he needed to be grown-up-like.

But when people become grown ups in the end, their childish spirit may also become grown up as well.

He felt like asking people: "How did you live your life?"

It wouldn't be so bad to empty your mind and enjoy your life, right?

That is how life is, is it not?

What kind of answers would he hear?

However, it wouldn't really matter in the end.

After all, there is more than one answer to that question.

Chapter 7 - In Heaven and on Earth, No One Is Noble but Me

Taichi and Aoki spent the night at a local inn recommended by the taxi driver, and took off the next morning as early as possible for the bullet train.

Although there was some unexpected delays due to snow, they had secured themselves plenty amount of time before arriving at the abandoned building before twelve (but not enough to stop by their home.)

"Ah~ Finally back! Even though it's cold, it's still kinda warm, even though it's still pretty cold!"

Aoki stretched his arms.

"This is exhausting... And to think we'll be dealing with 'Time Regression' right away..."

"Don't look so down, Taichi! It'll work out in the end!"

"...How do you even manage to stay that cheerful and jolly?"

Aoki seemed a bit too energetic. Could it be a retraction of him being too quiet lately?

"Anyway, Taichi, get ready to run!"

"...Wait, we have plenty of time left even if we talk... there's no need to run."

"I have something I want to tell Yui quick. No, I mean as soon as possible. Let's go!"

"I'm telling you! Have you already forgotten how you slipped over on the snow last night!?"

The two arrived the abandoned building.

They spent quite a bit of time to catch their breath.

"...If you want to tell her something... puff... At least save... your breath... for that..."

"Nah... That would defeat the whole point... puff..."

What did he mean by 'defeat the whole point'?

"What are you wasting your strength for? Are you two stupid?"

As expected, Inaba gave them a disdainful look.

"Taichi~"

Nagase said to Taichi affectionately.

"Where's~ My~ O~ Mi~ Ya~ Ge~?"^[6]

"...I don't have any."

"W—What? You went on a trip yet you didn't buy us any omiyage?"

"Er... We weren't exactly on a trip for fun..."

"But I thought it was Taichi's mission to buy omiyage on this trip?"

"I don't recall taking on any mission like that."

"Of course, Iori."

Inaba, as if comforting Iori, said to her. She seemed willing to side with Taichi.

"I told you to remind him through text, remember?"

"...Can you two at least sympathize with my wallet a little?"

The trip did cost him a fortune after all.

"Isn't it logical for guys to spent money for girls before they go out? Then again, I agree they can split the cost after they start going out."

"Inaban you're cheating again, slipping in stuff like it was nothing! But Taichi, I can cook for you as a special offer."

"You're the one cheating with 'special offer'! Don't say it after me and make it so high-sounding!"

"E—Er... I'm sorry for not buying any omiyage..."

""And?""

Both Nagase and Inaba's eyes glistened as they await Taichi's response.

"...I'll make it up with gifts next time."

As soon as Taichi said that, the two girls happily gave each other a high-five.

"Please don't tell me that... you've planned this all along."

What made it even scarier, was that Taichi could not deny that possibility.

"Yui."

Aoki spoke Kiriyaama's name.

Everyone else in the room became quiet.

Kiriyaama was quietly leaning on the cold concrete wall. This gesture made her barely noticeable in the room.

Nagase and Inaba sighed. Taichi realized that they probably wanted to postpone Aoki and Kiriyama's conversation.

Inaba sighed again and said:

"...Can we hold it till after today's 'Time Regression'? Otherwise, it will become difficult once it begins."

"Please, let me say it now."

Seems there's no use trying to convince you—as if saying that, Inaba shook her head.

"...I understand. Should we step out for a bit?"

"No, it's fine~ It's too cold outside anyway."

Aoki approached Kiriyama, and stopped a few feet before her.

Kiriyama did not face Aoki, and stared at the floor.

Taichi can see Aoki's side and Kiriyama's front from his position. Nagase and Inaba, too, quietly moved to a spot where they would not interfere.

"I... When I realized Nishino Nana and Yui look really alike, I was pretty surprised. At first I was only like 'Oh they look kinda alike', and never paid much thought to it."

Kiriyama remained silent.

"I... quite value this 'fresh' feeling right now, so I didn't consider much... Which is why, ever since I recalled those past feelings... I was very confused."

Aoki continued.

"I tried to tell myself: I love Yui more, I didn't know what was 'love' back then, so this 'love' right now is the real 'love'... But that didn't feel right to me."

Aoki looked up, as if searching for something in the sky.

"I wanted to confirm my feelings... So I went and saw Nishino Nana."

Kiriyama gulped anxiously.

"Then I realized, I truly loved Nana. I cannot deny that feeling from my past."

"...I see."

Kiriyama responded for the first time.

It was a voice of suppressed emotion.

"Because, at the time... I was living my life the fullest."

Kiriyama's head lifted a bit.

"Hence, I won't deny my current feelings. I want to be sure of every minute of my life. I don't want to deny my past, that includes things that I hate and things that I wanna forget, because these memories are proof that I've lived my life the fullest."

What sort of resolution does it take to be so confident about your life?

How should one live in order to become like him?

Was Aoki irresponsible?

No.

Aoki had taken himself more seriously than anyone else.

He engaged his life the fullest more than anyone else.

"I once loved Nishono Nana. And now, I love Kiriya Yui."

He proclaimed openly, decisively, fearlessly and straightforwardly.

"There is nothing wrong with that."

Aoki determinedly asserted.

Taichi held his breath in astonishment by Aoki's demeanor.

Kiriya lifted her head.

"...What do you mean?"

"It means that I... that Aoki Yoshifumi truly loves Kiriya Yui."

Kiriya stood frozen, speechless.

After a few seconds, she lowered her head again.

"...But that's only because... I look like Nishino Nana, no?"

"No. Definitely not. Nana is Nana. Yui is Yui. I, at this moment, can be very sure of that."

Aoki said to Kiriya, who was still staring at the floor.

"Nana looks like Yui. She's probably like Yui personality-wise too. Even so, that only means I like that type of girl."

Aoki said in a bright tone, and grinned.

"Now that I think of it, I like girls with long hair. I remember telling that to Nana. After that Nana started growing hers long."

Aoki started cheerfully talking about his past affection in front of his current love as if it was no longer an issue.

"Then again, that doesn't mean I only love a person based on looks."

"...Then... is it based on the person itself?"

Kiriyama asked softly.

"Yup! But that's not exactly right either to be honest. How should I put it... I guess I can only say: Love at first sight?"

To love a person.

"...Am I... really... worth it? ..."

Kiriyama's voice sounded as if she could no longer hold her tears.

"Yui is worth more than anyone in this world, as far as I'm concerned."

Aoki believed Kiriyama to be worth more than anyone in the world.

If he had to reason it, he could not possibly say "worth more than anyone".

Yet, he chose to make that statement.

There might be no reason.

There might not need to be any reason at all.

"It's all because I love Yui. And I must tell this to you."

Aoki said and became silent.

He did not make any implications like "Hence I wish you would."

It seemed he meant to let Kiriyama decide on her own.

Everyone was quiet. Only a faint sobbing sound could be heard in the background.

They were no longer aware of the cold, nor the darkness, nor the stench of the old structure.

Everything was flushed away by this man.

Kiriyama, who received this feeling head on... How much of this powerful emotion was surging within her?

"...—etic... —thetic..."

Kiriyama wiped her eyes and started murmuring.

"Eh? What are you——"

"I'm pathetic! I'm pathetic! I'm pathetic! I'm pathetic——!"

Kiriyama pound her hand that was wiping her eyes before on the wall.

It was so much force that Taichi almost thought he felt the building shook from it.

"I'm truly pathetic——!"

Kiriyama's opened her eyes, bit her lip and began howling like a ferocious beast.

"Y—Yui? Why are you yelling all of the sudden?"

"...I knew... deep down..."

It was like the calmness after the storm, Kiriyama's tone suddenly became settled like the sea.

However, what seemed to be calm and quiet, there was a certain tension in the air that nobody would want to approach.

Aoki's word had forced open the floodgate to Kiriyaama's emotion.

"I've always knew... that I must take the first step... yet I kept hesitating... feeling comfortable... and waiting for a chance..."

Kiriyaama clasped her fists.

"I wanted to move forward... But in the end it was just all talk... Everyone was nice to me, so I spoiled myself, thinking that I can take it slowly... that I can 'eventually' come through... I kept asking myself: When will I ever achieve that? ... Eventually..."

Kiriyaama lowered her head, her hair covered her eyes.

"In the end... I'm useless... I never look at anything directly... I'm always escaping... escaping..."

Her soliloquy was not yet finished.

"I knew the truth deep down... yet... I refused to acknowledge it... the longer I dragged on... the more I refused..."

Kiriyaama held her tears and snuffed.

"Because if I do... If I acknowledge it, that would mean that I in the past two years was nothing more than a joke..."

As Kiriyaama shouted, the tears that she held for so long began flowing.

That was a sign of something dissolving within Kiriyaama.

"It hurts... It hurts... It hurts it hurts it hurts! But, even so... even so!"

Kiriyaama's hair became disarranged and continued shouting.

"Hey, Yui, are you alright? Where does it hurt?"

Aoki inquired with concern, but Kiriyaama did not hear him.

"Even if it hurts even if it hurts even if it hurts even if it hurts...! I still have to move forward!"

Nobody tried to stop Kiriyaama from shouting.

They couldn't.

"I feared men... because I was afraid of guys, I couldn't practice with them, so I gave up karate. What was that supposed to mean!?"

In a sense, this had become something like Kiriyaama's confession of her regrets in her life.

"Couldn't I just explain to them? Couldn't I just ask the dojo to look out for me? Why didn't I do that? Because I didn't want people to know the truth? Because I don't want to remember? ...In the end I was just making excuses, was I not? If I tried looking, I could have found another dojo that would be willing to separate practices between guys and girls right? Why didn't I do any of those?"

These were words from Kiriyaama, to her 'self' that could no longer change the past.

"But it probably wasn't just that... those so-called reasons were probably trivial. I mean they matter, but it wasn't just that! I somehow felt it... I've felt it before... I was aware of it."

Was it because she was reverted to her past self?

"I... believed that I couldn't defeat men... hence I stopped trying! They haven't even done anything yet, but I've already lost simply because they are guys... This must be why I kept running away."

Kiriyama confronted herself.

No longer avoiding the subject nor running away, looking directly and carefully at everything, including the ones she hated.

Just as Aoki Yoshifumi did towards his own feelings.

"I don't know! I don't know the truth myself either! But one thing's for sure is that I kept running away! I've stopped trying to fight!"

Kiriyama started gasping and started trembling, as if she was trying to use up every ounce of her strength. Even then, Kiriyama did not stop shouting. It was as if she wanted to crush everything within her to bits. She kept shouting.

"So what if I have androphobia!? So what if I tremble near a guy!? So what if I repulse towards a guy when he touches me!? I could have overcome it! Why did I give up without even trying!?"

Kiriyama shouted, engraving her own words within herself.

It probably seemed silly, but for Kiriyama, it was a significant ritual.

"No matter what reason, if I never tried to move forward and hide behind those 'reasons', then they are not 'reasons' at all... they are nothing more than 'excuses'!"

True enough, even if there was a good reason, but if you only hide behind it and not take any action...

If it was just because of such 'reason' that you would choose to give up...

"Even if I have androphobia... it's only just that! My body can still move, right? The one who decides whether to step forward or not is me, is it not? And in the end, the one who never tried to step forward... is me, is it not?"

Unless it was something like 'Unleash Desire', the one who decides your next course of action would always be yourself.

Only you could make your own choices.

Every choice would be your own choices.

"Since the beginning, since the beginning, since the beginning, since the beginning... It was I who never tried to step forward!"

Kiriyama shouted at the lead-like ceiling, and collapsed on her knees.

Kiriyama, who seemed to have vented out everything, stayed still on the floor.

It was as if she was completely burned out.

Seeing this, Taichi and the rest could not do anything.

No, to say it more accurately, they did not feel the need to do anything.

It was because they saw it: On the girl who just broke out of her shell, confessed everything about herself, left nothing behind... her flame was burning bright.

"...When did I stop trying... stop caring?"

Kiriyama quietly murmured in a clear voice.

"...I used to hate losing... Since when did I stop feeling anything even after I lose?"

Kiriyama lifted her head, and tilted in confusion.

"...Not knowing my worth? But, shouldn't I fight for my worth?"

She adjusted one of her legs.

"...If I hate being a nobody, shouldn't I just step up on the stage?"

She rose from the floor.

"I used to be... able to walk on my own, with my own strength... Since when was I not able to do that without help from the others?"

She stomped on the floor, clasped her fist, and the fire on her blazed.

Foo~ Ha~ Foo~ Ha——Kiriyama took several deep breath.

She wiped her tears, and looked at everyone else in the room.

Kiriyama's expression became determined.

"I will stop running away, stop stagnating. I still use my own strength and fight my way forward. The me that only relies on others, shall end right here."

She declared decisively.

"I... will become stronger."

That was Kiriyama's choice.

Kiriyama approached straight towards Aoki without any sign of hesitation, and looked at him in the eyes.

"All these time... I'm really sorry. You were nice to me, and I spoiled myself, thinking that we could take it slowly... I mean, you've helped me so much, yet I still said horrible things to you, and started yelling at you like a jerk. I'm sorry."

"...You don't need to apologize."

"I guess. That's not the problem."

Kiriyama's face loosened.

It was a warm, beautiful, and cheerful smile.

"...Thank you, Aoki. Thanks to your charging head on, I can finally get myself to step forward. Thank you very much."

"Ah, don't mention it... I—It's embarrassing to hear it coming from you~"

Aoki scratched his head and averted his eyes.

Then, as if she had suddenly thought of an idea, Kiriyama asked Aoki:

"Hey, lemme ask you... What would you do if I hug you?"

"Hug me? I—I'd be very happy of course! I mean the person I love——"

Squeeze.

Kiriyama hugged Aoki tightly.

The same Kiriyama who had androphobia, who quivered when a guy comes near and repulsed when touched by a guy.

Due to difference in height, Kiriyama's arms were wrapped around just above Aoki's waist height.

Kiriyama's body was visibly twitching, as if she was about to break any second.



Kiriyama dug her face onto Aoki's chest.

"Hey, Yui... don't push yourself..."

Nagase tried to approach with concern.

"...Don't, Iori."

Inaba grabbed on Nagase's shoulder and stopped her.

Aoki, who was being hugged by Kiriyama, stood frozen like a statue with his arms suspended in an awkward gesture.

He seemed too surprised for words.

Kiriyama, who was twitching at what seemed to be a dangerous rate, her trembling began to lessen slightly... really slightly, and slightly.

Even so, there were occasions where she would suddenly jolt as if shocked by electricity.

But her trembling gradually lessened.

Slightly, steadily...

Just as Taichi thought that, she started trembling violently again.

Yet, she refused to let go of Aoki's body.

Kiriyama turned her face away, probably due to difficulty breathing.

Kiriyama bit her lip and held on; her face was drenched in sweat, and her expression was distorted by fear.

Her trembling began to lessen slightly once again, just slightly.

Slightly.

Slightly.

Slightly.

And then finally——she stopped trembling.

Kiriyama slowly let go of Aoki.

She gently tapped Aoki's chest with her fist.

Aoki, who seemed to be overwhelmed by Kiriyama's feat, collapsed and sat on the floor.

"...I win."

Kiriyama grinned, even though her face was still sweating from anxiety.

A grin that would only come from a fearless, reckless boy.

"I did it... I knew I could do it if I tried..."

"You've done it... have you? ..."

Nagase asked with an uncertain voice.

"I won't lose to anyone or anything anymore!"

Kiriyama stood there with a majestic gesture, and flickered her hair that was emitting a chestnut-hued glow.

It was a mighty aura.

Could a person really change this much?

No, 'this' was what she used to be.

"...Ahaha, what's this feeling? I feel nostalgic, like I gone back to when I was little... back to when I still believed that I could do anything."

Kiriyama beamed with pride, and starting throwing punches in the air in rapid succession.

"The phrase 'In Heaven and On Earth, No One is Noble but Me'^[7] seems like a perfect fit to me! Not to mention my name also has the character 'Yui'."

She said half-jokingly and half-seriously.

"Yui..."

Inaba could not help but to voice out her concern.

"If you're using it to mean that 'I am the best' then... you're using it wrong."

The room fell into an awkward silence.

After a few seconds, Kiriyama's face turned bright red.

Seemed very Kiriyama-like.

"I—In any case, I will become stronger! That's right! That's all there is!"

She swung her arms like an energetic child.

"Become stronger? Do you really think someone like you could do that?"

Inaba purposefully questioned in a berating tone.

She seemed to believe that Kiriyama right now would be able to handle that.

"I—I will try."

"You really think 'trying' will help you?"

"Perhaps... not..."

Kiriyama lowered her voice and murmured.

Inaba immediately showed an expression that speaks of "Crap, did I go too far?"

"But, at least... I'm going to believe myself and try. That's what's important for me. I'd like to think so."

As Kiriyama finished, Inaba started laughing.

"Tee... Ahahaha! You and that guy who's completely dumbfounded over there, you're both dummies! So dumb that you're cute! The cutest dummies on earth!"

"W—What you mean by dummy? And could you not compare me to Aoki?"

"Well, even though you're both dummies, you're not stupid. Compare to you two, I'm... in a sense, I'm the one who's the real dummy here."

"Mmm... H—Huh? ... What do you mean?"

"Forget it, dummy."

"Stop calling me dummy! Those who call others dummy are the real dummies——Whoa!"

As Kiriyama was busy protesting, Nagase ran up and jumped on Kiriyama.

"Yui you're so cool~ Too cool! But cute at the same time! We should call that cool-cute!"

"Cool-cute... really? Cool-cute... that must be my ideal form!"

Nagase and Kiriyaama started dancing around in funny steps.

Meanwhile, Taichi suddenly remembered something and checked his phone for the time.

The time was...

"Hey, you guys! It's almost twelve!"

Just as Taichi shouted——

"Whoa!"

Aoki, who was previously still dumbfounded from awe and sitting on the floor, suddenly became a miniature boy.

"...Augh, the clothes are too big!"

It seemed Aoki was the only one who was affected by 'Time Regression' phenomenon this time.

Kiriyaama let go of Nagase's hand.

"...Come here, I'll help with your clothes... by the way, you..."

Kiriyaama knelt slightly in order to look at child-Aoki at eye level.

"Yoshifumi-kun... how old are you?"

"Ten."

The others felt uneasy, as that was exactly the age of Aoki under the effects of 'Time Regression' back then when they first found him mistaking Kiriyaama as somebody else.

"Ten, I see... Let me tell you, this might be difficult right now, but one day, I will become someone you would recognize right away as Kiriya Yui. You won't be able to mistake me as a certain someone else. I will become the only one."

Kiriya declared decisively with a calm yet instigating smile.

However, Aoki(10) went "Eh?" and tilted his head in puzzlement.

"What are you talking about? Kiriya-san is the only Kiriya-san in the world, no?"

Aoki(10) said in a matter-of-fact tone without the slightest doubt.

Everyone else in the room were struck speechless at those innocent words from the young boy.

"Eh? ... Erm... Do you not think I am... Nishino Nana-san's sister?"

Kiriya, confused, inquired Aoki(10).

"Hm? Well you do look alike with Nana~ But Kiriya-san is Kiriya-san, it has nothing to do with Nana, does it?"

"Ah... Hmm, right. I see... Indeed, everyone is unique in this world."

Kiriya nodded in agreement.

"That's right that's right! There are nobody that are the same after all~"

"Ahaha, you're right. Hehe~"

"Why are you laughing?"

"It's nothing~ Hehe, it's that simple. Hahaha, how did I end up being reminded by a child and not noticed it earlier?"

It was a simple fact, something that could easily be understood by heart.

Yet, human would unconsciously lose sight of it.

Kiriyama giggled and proceeded to find clothes for Aoki(10).

"Just tell me why you're laughing already~"

Aoki(10) protested.

Aoki's determination influenced Kiriyama, and changed Kiriyama.

Now, the two moved forward together with an overwhelming force.

Connection between people can make people stronger——Taichi believed such deep in his heart.



Kiriyama and Aoki(10) were chattering happily.

The room was filled by a sedate atmosphere.

Inaba, who was sitting next to Taichi, remarked:

"In the end, how come he didn't mix them up? Was it because Aoki's memory was refreshed after he saw Nishino Nana, that he no longer confuses them? Or was it... Never mind, it doesn't matter now."

Inaba gave up speculating. She let out a deep sigh and continued:

"How long is this gonna last anyway? «Heartseed» still haven't shown up. It's already the 3rd of January, if this doesn't end by the beginning of the school..."

Inaba's expression became very worried. Taichi, in hopes of cheering her up, said:

"We'll be fine, Inaba. The phenomenon should be ending soon."

Taichi said confidently.

However, his confidence seemed to have brought an opposite effect.

Inaba noted something sharply and narrowed her eyes.

"...How are you able to be so sure?"

"What you mean by 'so sure'... I... just believe it that way..."

It would be bad if he let the fact of his encounter with «Number Two» slip.

Taichi immediately tried to avoid the subject.

"Your words and attitude just then confirmed one thing for me."

Inaba smiled like a hunter would towards a prey in the net.

"Taichi, what are you hiding from us?"

Taichi could tell from her looks that she didn't have the slightest doubt about her deduction.

"What's up with you two? Why are we suddenly so serious? Loosen up, loosen up!"

"Don't interfere, Iori. Hey, am I correct, Taichi? If we really have to ask, why are you the 'only one' not affected? That made no sense to begin with, so you must be the key to the answer, am I right?"

Was he too careless?

"Judging by your reaction... I nailed it, didn't I?"

"No..."

"Taichi... Is it... the truth?"

Nagase inquired tactfully.

"I... can't tell you."

Taichi accidentally let it slip.

"What you mean by 'you can't tell us'?"

Inaba cut straight to the point.

"If I tell anyone... he said there will be consequences."

It was a promise by that being, one who was one of «Heartseed»'s kind——
«Number Two».

"What you mean by 'consequences'?"

"That's..."

"If you know something then tell us. We can work out more options if you tell us more, right?"

Taichi gave in to Inaba's pressure. Like water coming out of a ruptured dam, he spilled everything to her.

"...These are everything that happened up till now... That's all I know..."

As he finished, Taichi looked down, dejected.

"Don't look so down, Taichi."

Kiriyama, who came forth to learn the situation, comforted him.

"So that's what's been happening..."

Nagase remarked with surprise. Inaba, on the other hand, looked a bit regretful.

"I probably... shouldn't have forced you... There's hoping though, they aren't really watching us twenty-four seven——"

"Ah~ Ah..."

A disconnect voice rang among them.

The owner of that voice was none other than Nagase Iori.

——No, it was a certain someone who was using Nagase's body.

"Who... are you?" Inaba asked.

"... Who? Doesn't... matter, because... it is time to say good bye."

It said sluggishly, like it was talking in a dream.

"... I remember warning you that... there will be consequences, that it will go on 'forever', did I not?"

Nagase——«Number Two», to be exact, face towards Taichi.

The darkness radiating from «Number Two»'s eyes caught on Taichi's.

Taichi could not feel his own body.

"It was a mistake to choose you... Then again there might not be any difference... No matter, it was going to end anyway."

As if already lost interest, «Number Two» looked away.

"It was going to be found out and come to an end anyway... I suppose this is acceptable in a sense... No matter... Good bye."

As «Number Two» finished, Nagase's head dropped.

"... Hm? That felt... just now... Wait, what happened?"

"What the... That thing doesn't even care to talk to us? ... If that's the case, I'd probably prefer «Heartseed»..."

Inaba complained.

Suddenly,

——*Clank.*

"Ugh..."

Aoki(10), who was sitting on the far side of the room dropped his video game, and curled up in pain.

Kiriyama rushed towards him.

"Y—Yoshifumi-kun, are you alright? It's not even close to five yet——"

——The next moment, Aoki(10) returned to the normal Aoki.

"Ow-ow-ow-ow! T—Too tight! My clothes!"

Aoki exclaimed in pain.

"What... huh?"

Kiriyama stopped short on her steps.

"Huh? ... Does this mean it's over? Just like that..."

Inaba's voice was both relieved and dejected.

Thank goodness.

Taichi loosened his body.

When «Number Two» appeared, he was worried that something bad will happen, but it seemed to be over now.

If that was the case, he should have told everyone sooner—

Taichi suddenly felt an intense heat searing within his body.

It was hot, painfully hot, as though every block of cell in his body was going to erupt. His head started spinning, melting. Taichi bent forward, his hand on his chest.

—*Hey! Taichi! Are you alright?!*

He could hear Nagase's distant voice.

—*What's going on? This is just like 'Time Regression'... No... Does that mean, including Taichi, the time frame of 'Time Regression' phenomenon has become completely random!?*

He heard Inaba's voice. After that, Taichi's mind went dark.

In his subconscious, he felt an incredible sense of nostalgia.

+ + +

I want to go home soon.

I have to go home soon.

I can't leave mom alone with that man.

It's too dangerous.

I must be there for her.

I must play my role better.

I only have to do that.

I must do that.

If I can start over again...

Chapter 8 - To Start Over

Taichi regained consciousness.

He could feel a bit of heat remained in his body.

Memories of his past that were long washed away surged his mind once more.

"...Hm? Whoa!?"

He looked at himself and noticed he was dressed in several child-sized clothes.

"Are you feeling okay?"

Nagase asked with concern, her expression was tense.

"Ah, I'm fine..."

"Here, get changed."

Nagase said and handed Taichi the clothes he was wearing before.

"What's the status now?"

Taichi inquired, but Nagase shook her head.

He looked towards the window, only to find the pitch black darkness that shrouded the sky.

"Sorry, it's all my fault... I'm really sorry. I won't ask you to forgive me... but please let me say sorry."

As she finished updating Taichi their situation, Inaba bowed her head on the table and started apologizing.

"You don't need to feel that bad... I was the one to blame to begin with... If you keep apologizing like that I'd feel even more terrible..."

The CRC members are now trapped in a situation where they had no way to tell when they would undergo 'Time Regression' phenomenon or how long it would last.

And this time, including Taichi, it could be any of the five.

"...So during the roughly five hours I became twelve, everyone but Nagase had undergone 'Time Regression' once..."

Taichi repeated what he just heard, not that it was of any meaning.

"...Yes, that's right."

Inaba murmured sombrely. Across her view, she could see Kiriya(9) and Aoki(7), both wrapped in blankets and playing happily.

It was past seven o'clock at night.

"I'm hungry~ I'm hungry~"

Kiriya(9) sang rhythmically.

"Hey, it's dangerous, don't twirl on the chair like that... actually don't you think your sense of balance is too good?"

"Taichi-san you should try too~ Let's see who can twirl the most rounds!"

"I said it's dangerous, be a good girl."

Taichi carried Kiriya(9) down from the chair.

"Boo~ Boring~"

"Hey, Taichi, what are you doing, hurry up."

Inaba called out at Taichi.

"Alright, Taichi, Aoki, I'm counting on you guys."

Inaba patted on their shoulders.

"Understood."

"Roger that, Captain Inaba!"

The two were given a mission: They were to buy preservable food that would last them a while.

"You gotta be quick. If any one of you undergo 'Time Regression', call me right away and rush back as fast as you can."

Under this circumstance where they could be turned into a child any moment, Taichi and the others could no longer step outside freely.

Physical transformation was visible by the naked eye.

Even then, they still needed food and water.

"If you can, use the public bathroom on the way. We need to reduce the number of time we head out as much as possible."

"Hm, can't we use the bathroom at the store?"

Aoki asked.

"We don't know when we'll undergo 'Time Regression', it's best that we stick to remote areas."

"Understood, Inaba-chan."

The reason the two were chosen was because their 'Time Regression' phenomenon ended the most recently.

If the phenomenon had just ended, they should have a laxer time frame before it happens again.

Needless to say, this was only their wishful thinking.

"We'll be right back."

"Take care... Be safe."

Nagase reminded them and saw their way out. However, she looked pallid and weak, so much that one would want to respond to her: "We should be asking you instead. Are you alright?"

Time passed nine o'clock at night. The five of them were not undergoing 'Time Regression' at the moment.

Nagase had turned thirteen year-old for an hour and half before this. By this time, everyone had undergone 'Time Regression' once since «Number Two» randomized every variable of this phenomenon.

"...Okay, how did it go? My family should be no problem, at least for tonight."

Inaba inquired the other four's status with their families.

Taichi and the others notified their families with "I can't come home tonight, and I probably won't be able to for a while."

Once they were reverted, they would no longer be conscious of their actions.

It was no longer a situation where they could make up something and gloss over with it.

"Mine will be fine for now as well."

Aoki said, then Taichi spoke:

"I think I'm fine... Except my family... is furious. Even my ever carefree mother got mad."

Not to mention Taichi heard his sister said: "I don't care about Onii-chan anymore, I'm disowning him!"

If he was ever forgiven, Taichi had a feeling that his wallet would be squeezed dry.

"My family... might be a bit of concern."

Kiriyama pressed her forehead, distressed.

"They've been suspecting 'something is up' ever since I've been staying out during the winter break, and now I'm practically running away from home..."

Taichi remembered the gentle yet concerned face of Kiriyama's mother.

"Not to mention... my sister has already found this place. Even though I asked her to keep it a secret and she said okay too, but I don't know how long she could hold on..."

Even their hiding place was no longer a guarantee.

"...What about Nagase?"

Taichi inquired. Nagase, who was staring at the floor absently, lifted her head abruptly in response.

"Eh? Oh, mine's okay for now... although mine's okay..."

"What's up? If you're concerned about something tell us."

Inaba urged.

"Erm... can I, just for a little bit... can I please go home? I mean really just for a little bit!"

Her expression was desperate.

"Rejected. Silly. If I say yes, then it would mean we could do anything we want, wouldn't it? If I let that happen, we'd eventually be... found out."

If what was happening to them were found out by the public...

They had discussed the scenario many times, about what might happen to them and what they could do.

There would be a commotion, and it would end there—Witnesses would be sent to asylums. And they, on the other hand, would be thrown into research facilities.

In the worst case scenario, «Heartseed» or «Number Two» or even others alike would erase everything.

Those beings seemed to have done this several times before. Yet there were no rumors nor traces of such in public even until now. Inaba mentioned that, considering how fast information spreads in modern media, one could deduce that those beings had some sort of mechanism to keep things under wrap.

If that assumption was correct, then what would be erased? Their memories? The truth? Or worse... everything?

They could not deny any of those possibilities.

There was no limit to what those beings could do.

"Of course... It wouldn't help... Sorry, don't worry about it."

Nagase was very disheartened; she looked as if she would crumble at the slightest touch of the wind.

As the night gradually turned darker, the temperature became colder and colder.

To keep Inaba(3) from catching a cold, the others covered her in several layers of blanket, and had her sleep near the heater.

"...Is she asleep? For a three year-old child, she'd be very sleepy by twelve at midnight."

Kiriyama said gently.

"Okay, lemme get some air in here."

Aoki opened the windows.

Since they were using an oil heater, they needed to be aware of air ventilation.

"It's not safe to have everybody sleep with the oil heater on..."

Taichi murmured and tried to think of something.

"Ah~ You know, I wanna take a bath! I'm getting all sticky from the sweat..."

Kiriyama complained and kept her voice low to avoid waking Inaba(3).

"I want to take one too... but there's nothing we can do now, so I'll endure it."

Nagase(11), though young, was a mature and responsible girl.

He slowly opened his eyes.

His head felt dizzy and weighed as if it were made of lead.

Taichi tried to stay awake for as long as possible in order to keep an eye from accidents, but he seemed to have succumbed to his sleep.

His back hurt.

He could hear someone moving in the background.

Taichi rubbed his eyes and sat up.

The light from portable lamp stung his eyes a little.

Where the light could just reach, Taichi caught a glimpse of a shadow moving.

The electric light beamed on what seemed to be smooth and fair skin.

It was a dazzling sight; its surface gleamed like porcelain.

The shoulder outlined a curve so beautiful that one would be tempted to touch it.

As Taichi followed his view. The bright skin endlessly extends into the dark, and came across a thigh——

"Hm?"

Taichi let out a noise in surprise.

"Eh?"

——Nagase, who upper body was only dressed in her bra, looked around towards Taichi.

"Uh? Taichi?"

Nagase quickly grabbed her sweater nearby and covered herself.

"I—I didn't see anything! Didn't see anything at all!"

Taichi averted his eyes in panic.

'Didn't see anything' obviously implied otherwise, Taichi thought to himself as he embarrassingly listened to the rustling sounds of Nagase getting dressed.

"I—It's okay now, Taichi."

Nagase called out, and Taichi turned around to face Nagase again.

"Did you just... turn back to normal?"

"Yeah, sorry I woke you."

As Nagase was folding the clothes she wore as a child, she asked:

"How old... was I?"

"Eleven."

"Eleven, I see... What was I like?"

Nagase folded her clothes very tidily.

"You were a very responsible... and clever girl... something like that."

Taichi pondered for a better answer.

"Responsible girl... you say? Seemed that way..."

Was she implying that it was not the case?

"...Never mind that for now. Yui and Aoki... they were amazing back there today."

"Yeah... they were."

Very amazing.

Amazing that, there was nothing needed to be add.

"They are truly... amazing... I feel like I'll never catch up to them."

"...I feel the same."

They were overwhelming, Taichi could not help but to feel that way.

"Taichi too..."

"What you mean by 'too'? You made it sound like I'm amazing or something."

"Aren't you?"

Nagase looked towards Taichi with a serious expression.

"No such thing... I'm powerless on my own..."

Nagase's expression turned sombre.

Suddenly, Taichi realized.

Why were they so down after seeing Kiriya and Aoki sprinting forward?

That could not be right. Definitely.

"However..."

Taichi made up his mind and spoke, but immediately stumbled upon his words.

"Erm... But... Even though I'm powerless alone... Together with a certain someone, I feel we could achieve many things... Aoki and Kiriyaama as well, they changed because there were two of them... I'd like to believe it as such."

He managed to conclude it nicely.

"'Together with a certain someone' you say..."

Nagase looked towards the floor and murmured, as if trying to convince something to herself.

"Well, I was going to——"

"Oh yeah, why are we staying up for so long chatting anyway? We should get some sleep while we can! Mmm~ I left the blanket for too long, it's getting cold!"

Nagase quickly ended the conversation.

She smiled weakly at Taichi.

It was a brief smile, like a flash in the pan. Yet because of that it felt even more beautiful, like it was from a dream.

Nagase returned to where she was sleeping and covered herself in her blanket.

Taichi put the portable lamp in a location where the light would not be visible from the outside. The room felt dim and cold even under the light.

He proceeded to sleep along side with everyone else in the room——Nagase, Kiriyaama, Aoki, and Inaba(3).

They curled up tightly to keep themselves as warm as possible.

It was a warm, but worrying sight.

Taichi felt as if a sudden darkness in the room dawned upon them, devouring them.

A certain darkness that made Taichi dread from deep within his heart.

What would happen to them?

They could not even step out to places with people, let alone go home.

With the food they bought earlier, they could hang on for another day. But what about after that?

Their money resource were limited, and they still needed to replenish the fuel for the heater. And bathing? What about cleaning their clothes?

In case where they could no longer stay here, where should they go?

How would they explain to their families?

What would happen if this continued after school starts? What should they do?

Run? To where?

Could they survive at all?

Taichi could not answer any of that.

Not to mention, the one who created this situation was none other than——himself.

He was too naive; too naive in every way.

Why did he not kept his promise with «Number Two»?

Was it because of Inaba's pressure?

Was it because he heard "It will end soon", so he let his guard down?

These were just terrible excuses that could not even be considered excuses.

Besides, he had no right to make excuses to begin with.

It was because Taichi never persisted on keeping his 'promise' with «Number Two».

He was only going along because he could not decide.

He was given an important task, yet he wavered.

Had he even taken the problem seriously?

Had he seriously tried to consider his course of actions?

He gave up since the beginning because he felt he could not do it, did he not?

He did not even have the right to lament, because he never tried.

He feared his responsibility. He used his weakness as an excuse.

He claimed that he disliked seeing anyone around him in pain and intervened to help, yet he tried to escape when it came to his own problems.

Pathetic, he thought.

If it were others, they would have pulled it off beautifully. Thinking about just that frustrated him.

But it was too late. No matter how much he would regret—he could not return to the past.

After he made sure Inaba(3) did not catch any cold and was sleeping soundly, Taichi wrapped himself in his blanket.

Even with several layers of blanket, he could still feel the concrete floor; its coldness crept beneath him.

The sun arose. Then the sun descended.

The second night since the randomizing of the phenomenon dawned upon the CRC members.

'Time Regression' occurred several times today.

"I said, a friend of mine picked us up to visit his villa... Huh? Get him on the phone? That's... Ah... The signal is really bad out here in the mountains..."

Kiriyama hung up and turned off her phone's power. She said somberly:

"...This is bad. At this rate, my family will call the cops..."

"I have to say though, Kiriyama... your story was kinda far-fetched..."

Taichi said, not that his own story was any better.

The air in the room was chilling and heavy.

They had temporarily turned off the heater in order to save fuel.

Taichi's stomach made a unpleasant growl. Even in such critical condition, he could still feel the hunger.

He touched his hair briefly. It felt icky.

They were desperate, both in body and mind. Everyone was beginning to look wan.

In fact, they would probably collapse any minute. But they endured it because they were together.

However, they did not know how much longer they could hold on.

"...Let's talk about this while we're all here."

Inaba rallied everyone.

Her voice was weaker than usual. One could see her exhaustion.

At this moment, nobody was undergoing 'Time Regression'.

"First of all we were talking about seeking help. Until we have no other choice, I'd like to hold that off for now. If possible I wanna avoid getting other people involved in this mess."

Everyone agreed.

"...I'm sorry."

Taichi apologized.

"Didn't I say stop apologizing? You silly... Anyway, since we can't really do anything else right now, we should try and replenish some food for tomorrow."

"...only for tomorrow, would that be enough, Inaba-chan? Don't you think it's better to stock up more in one go?"

Even Aoki, who was still rather cheerful in the morning, looked withered right now.

"Yes, it would be sensible to decrease our frequency of stepping out in order to reduce risk. However... since anything could happen to us any minute, I want to save ourselves some cash."

"You mean... in case any of us get sick?" Kiriyaama asked.

"Yes."

Even their lives were on the line.

"Anyway..."

"Ah, sorry! Phone call."

Nagase quickly picked up her phone and stood up.

"Hello, yes——Hm? Uh-huh, uh-huh... Eh?"

Nagase stiffened.

"Wait, Mom? What's wrong? Mom!"

Nagase exclaimed anxiously; the situation did not sound good.

"Mom, wait——Ah!"

Nagase took the phone off her ear and redialed several times, but it did not go through.

Nagase began trembling.

"...What do I do..."

Nagase murmured weakly with her eyes swollen.

Nagase hesitantly explained what happened during the winter break.

One day, Nagase's second father appeared at her family's doorstep. According to Nagase, he was a violent man. Kiriya and Aoki, who did not know of this beforehand, were shocked.

Even though he was once her father, Nagase had three succeeding fathers after him. They never contacted each other since he left, let alone meeting.

They had no idea how he found them, but he showed up nonetheless.

"...He was her ex-husband after all, so Mom let him in."

In the end, the man started brooding in their home.

"At first he would help around the house... we, too, thought he wanted to make up... but then... he began idling around and started asking for money to drink..."

And he was becoming more violent by the day.

Even though he had not hit anyone yet, he would throw things whenever he was drunk.

As Taichi listened, he could not help but to feel a sudden rush in his head.

Nagase was troubled all these time, how come he had never noticed it?

He should have been protecting everyone before he was caught in the 'Time Regression' phenomenon.

"What's with him sounding like the kind of bum we see in books... you should kick him out of your house."

Inaba muttered angrily.

"I thought... we might be able to start over."

Nagase said.

"I... wondered from time to time, if I've done it a better way, things might change for the better."

If the past could be redone.

"There were many options that I didn't take."

The world is a series of once only multiple choice questions.

"...But, in the end... I failed to play my role properly. Mom just told me that I... 'must not go home'..."

Playing her role properly?

What did Nagase mean by playing her role properly?

"This sounds... critical, does it?"

Kiriyama asked tactfully.

"...I don't know... but..."

"Why didn't you say anything before?"

Inaba inquired sternly, her tone was filled with slight hint of anger.

"Because... that's my problem after all."

"That may be true, but——"

"Sorry!"

Nagase stood up and took out her phone.

She spun around and picked up the call.

"Hello? Mo——"

Nagase froze.

"...D... Dad..."

Nagase seemed to address that man as her 'Dad'.

"...Um, ah, yes... Yes... Huh?"

Nagase's tone shifted abruptly.

"Wait! Please don't! Dad——"

She kept the phone by her ear, and stood motionless.

After a few seconds, Nagase slowly lowered her phone.

The room was silent, no one said a word.

The mood around Nagase was so tense that no one was able to say anything to her.

Nagase turned around to face the others——She was close to succumbing to tears, her face distorted by emotion.

"What do I do... what do I do... what do I do?"

Nagase clutched her head and collapsed on her knees.

"What do I do? I must go home quick... but if I undergo 'Time Regression' on the way, I'll cause trouble for everyone! I can't do that! But then..."

Taichi had never seen Nagase so desperate.

"Calm down, Nagase!" "Iori." "I—Iori!" "Iori-chan!"

Taichi, Inaba, Kiriyama and Aoki called out to Nagase.

But none of that went through to Nagase.

It was as if her soul was stolen.

"Nagase!"

Taichi rushed to Nagase's side and gripped her shoulders.

"What do I do... I must hurry home... But I can't... I can't bring us any more trouble... But I have to go! What do I do?"

She appeared so frail as if she was going to break any second.

Taichi almost panicked along with her, but knowing it would only make things worse, he managed to calm himself down.

He felt he must protect her.

Taichi wanted to protect her.

There must be at least hundreds and thousands of things going through Nagase's mind at the moment.

Therefore, Taichi only asked her:

"What does Nagase want to do?"

Nothing would work without knowing this.

"I don't know... I don't know... I don't know any more..."

Nagase only kept shaking her head.

—Next moment, Nagase shoulder slipped from Taichi's grip.

They could not tell what happened.

Upon closer look, they saw what seemed to be a grade-schooler Nagase.

It was the 'Time Regression' phenomenon.

Without a word, the child-Nagase stood up from the floor. She tucked back her falling clothes and headed towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Kiriya asked.

The child-Nagase stopped and looked back at them.

"Home."

"W—Why?"

Taichi continued.

"I'm going to protect Mom. If I play my role right, Dad will be in a better mood."

Those were eyes that were pure and clear: Untainted, crystal clear eyes. They emitted a dazzling aura, one could even call it sacred.

"...Why does it have to be you, Iori-chan, to protect your mother?" Inaba inquired.

"Because I love Mom."

That was the only reason. Nothing more.

Without the slightest trace of doubt, only answering to her own feelings.

A feeling that struck the others in awe.

The child understood what was important more than they did.

"Ugh..."

The grade-schooler Nagase suddenly gripped on her body—and instantly returned to the normal Nagase.

"Strange... I... Huh? Did I undergo 'Time Regression'?"

She started tidying her clothes, her expression confused.

"...Eh? How long has it been?"

"It was only a moment... about a minute."

Taichi answered.

"Ah... Then... I... I..."

Nagase murmured absently.

"I remember..."

Tears started flowing from her eyes.

"Strange... Why?"

Nagase smiled wryly and wiped her eyes.

She hid her face beneath her sleeves, and stayed motionless.

Then, she lifted her head. Her expression was determined.

"...I'm sorry, I've decided to go home."

Her stance was too gripping, that no one was able to do anything before she started moving.

"...Hold on, Nagase!"

Taichi hurriedly grabbed her by shoulder.

"I know I'm being stupid... But I have to hurry home... I'm sorry."

"Iori..."

"Iori-chan, you..."

Kiriyama and Aoki did not know what to say to her.

"Everyone here is important to me... I don't want to put everyone in danger just for the sake of me... but I... there's also someone else important to me... that want to protect."

Her eyes were filled with tears, which fully showed her true feelings.

There were many important things in this world.

They were not the only one in trouble in this world.

"I won't do anything that would put you guys at risk, I'll handle this myself."

"Ah..."

Taichi could not stop Nagase from shaking him off.

Nagase's past father was brooding in her home. Nagase's family was in trouble because of that man. To prevent the worst, Nagase must go home. Although Nagase hesitated at first due to the phenomenon, she had made up her mind and would rush home no matter what.

It happened so quickly, Taichi was unsure how to react.

And while he was stuck in confusion, Nagase would leave for her mother on her own...

"Hold it right there you freaking idiot!!!"

Inaba let out a furious, thunderous roar.

"You idiot! Why are you acting on your own!?"

She rushed forward with an overwhelming force and blocked in front of Nagase.

Inaba was the always most considerate person when it came to the CRC members. She would always make proper decisions base on different risks and circumstances.

For Inaba, who wanted to protect everyone, Nagase's course of action was unacceptable.

"Haven't you already failed once before!?"

Inaba shouted.

"Failed... before?"

Inaba's vigorous gesture puzzled Nagase.

"I'm talking about what's making you so painful right now! Do you know why you failed?"

Inaba pointed straight at Nagase's scar.

"Why... why... you mean..."

Nagase, overwhelmed by Inaba, murmured incoherently.

"It's because you won't tell anyone, won't asked anyone for help, and tried to do everything on your own! Why can't you understand!?"

"I... I..."

"And now you're trying to solve everything on your own again, then you start crying when it goes out of control, yet you try to charge head on by yourself again... Do you really think it's gonna end well!?"

"If I don't try... No, I have to try——"

"Look around you! ...What do you have around you!?"

Nagase looked around the room, and caught Inaba, Taichi, Kiriya, and Aoki in her eyes.

She began to waver.

"But... This is my... family matters..."

"Stop kidding your——"

"Stop kidding yourself!"

As he was wondering who shouted over Inaba, Taichi realized that, much to his surprise, it was none other than himself.

Everyone's focus fell on Taichi. He was startled, but it did not stop him from speaking:

"It may not have anything to do with us... and it's normally not for us outsiders to intervene... but if Nagase you are suffering from it, then it becomes our problem!"

Because someone important was suffering.

"Er... though I agree that I'm meddling too much..."

"This is not the time to say that!"

Inaba patted loudly on Taichi's shoulder.

Though she did not sound very pleased, Inaba grinned at Taichi.

As if she was saying "Good job" to him.

"'Speak up if you're worried', 'Don't run off and do stupid things without a word', these are all words you told me before, aren't they? That's why if you're troubled, tell me. There's a limit to how much I can notice you know."

Inaba said gently, as if trying to envelop Nagase in warmth.

"You have reliable companions right now. Don't you ever forget that."

There would always be things that could not be accomplished alone.

Which was why, there would always be people around to help.

"You have me too, Iori!"

"Me too, Iori-chan!"

Kiriyama and Aoki said.

"I, too... will always be by your side."

Taichi said.

Inaba added:

"Reliable, available, and would do so without a second thought—with such companions, what will you do?"

Inaba approached Nagase.

Friends, companions... What are they?

"You guys... Everyone..."

Nagase murmured absently, unsure of what her own expression would be.

And then——

"...Ugu... Uu... Uu..."

Nagase began crying like a child.

Her face was distorted from tears, and her hands rubbing her eyes.

"...Of course, you're still the one to make the call. Even I wouldn't want to forcefully interfere with other people's family matters. I agree that there are certain lines we shouldn't cross. Well then, what will you do?"

Inaba said lightheartedly.

As if it was not a big deal.

As if saying there was no need of courtesy, as it was meant to be, so there was no need to worry.

Nagase snuffed, and wiped her eyes to stop the tears.

Somewhere, sometime, those tears would one day flow again, Taichi thought.

It was wonderful to see those flowing tears not being the cold, unfeeling tears from Nagase's broken heart, but the warm and comforting tears instead.

Nagase kept her head lowered, and said in a sobbing voice:

"I've... always thought that... was something I must solve on my own..."

Her statement was not necessary wrong.

But there was not a rule in this world that says you must solve everything on your own.

"...Not to mention this was my own failure, so I feel I must mend it myself... but... in this situation... and my problem... Hence... Therefore..."

"Iori-chan, you can just put it simpler."

"That's right, Iori. You only need one sentence."

Light of salvation dawned upon Nagase.

Aoki and Kiriya stepped forward to be Nagase's light of guidance.

Perhaps they were influenced by yesterday's event. Words from those two were powerful and convincing.

Nagase, under everyone's guidance, finally lifted her head.

Her eyes were swollen, her expression distorted, and she held on her tears.

In the end, Nagase spoke the magic words:

"...Will you please help me?"

Words by a companion, words that would make others strive forward.

The girl who had tried to carry the weight of everything, is now asking for help.

No one answered.

There was no need to answer.

"Hey, Iori. What's the situation then? Do you just need to get home?"

"Eh? Ah... I don't know what's going on either... I need to be there to see for myself..."

"Alright, but you must not go by yourself... Should we split into two groups? You know what——let's just all go together!"

""""Yes!""""

Taichi, KiriYama and Aoki echoed at the exact same time.

The five ran at top speed towards Nagase's house.

They did not take the train nor the taxi——Correction, they could not.

If 'Time Regression' occurred in closed space, there would be no way to cover it.

They took the remote routes as much as possible.

There was no time to plan properly.

They would act accordingly whenever one of them undergo 'Time Regression'——Such was the only thing they could decide.

It had been a long while since Nagase received the phone call.

They did not stop to rest, only kept running, and running.

They pray that they would not undergo 'Time Regression'.

They must hurry towards their destination, and quickly resolve the problem.

"Ugh!"

Inaba suddenly pressed against her chest and fell on one knee.

"Inaban! Are you alright?"

"Inaba!"

Nagase and Taichi shouted out.

"The heat... This is——"

Inaba's body transformed abruptly.

"Wait! You gotta be kidding!"

Nagase quickly embraced the shrunken Inaba and shielded her from sight.

Fortunately they were on a fairly dark road and there was no sign of other people nearby.

"Ina... Himeko-chan, how old are you?"

Nagase inquired, and proceeded to roll up Inaba's over-length sleeves.

".. Twelve."

"Puff... puff, six-grader, is she? ... It'll be difficult to bring her along..."

Taichi began thinking. Not to mention that Inaba(12)'s clothes were too big that they made it difficult for her to move, she might have less physical strength than usual.

"Aoki!"

Kiriyama suddenly screamed.

Taichi looked towards Aoki, only to find his clothes remained on the ground.

"No way!"

Kiriyama searched among Aoki's clothes and found a small child popping out from it.

"U... Uweee..."

"There, there, don't cry! It's cold out here, don't come out! Stay still."

Kiriyama wrapped the clothes around Aoki and picked him up.

"Waa~"

"Let's see... How old are you? Can you talk?"

"Awawa~"

"N—Not good... he doesn't seem to have learned to talk yet..."

Aoki seemed to have been reverted to around one year-old.

"What do I do... It's all my fault... What do I do..."

Nagase entered a slight state of panic.

"These two both underwent 'Time Regression'... If it occurs on us too... And if these two return to normal out here... Ahhh..."

Kiriyama began to panic as well.

Taichi felt his heart racing.

A nauseating feeling rushed through his chest; he felt he would throw up any minute.

He then pinched his hand and pulled himself from being overwhelmed by unpleasant thoughts.

Calm down—— He told himself.

The more he wanted to avoid, to escape, the more he must confront it.

If the greater the damage that failure would cause, the more he had to muster up courage.

He already failed once and put his companions in jeopardy.

He would not fail again.

This time, with resolution, he would face it and find a way out.

"...Kiryama, can you bring Inaba and Aoki back to the building?"

That was the best option he could think of.

"Eh? On my own?"

"Yes, I and Nagase will head towards her house."

"B—But, what if Yui undergoes 'Time Regression'... and there's no guarantee that I and Taichi won't undergo the phenomenon together..."

Nagase said.

Taichi knew it was a gamble.

He looked straight into Kiriyama's eyes.

Kiryama looked back at him with the same keenness, then she checked on Aoki(1) in her arms.

"I understand. I'll do as Taichi say."

"Uh, Yui..."

"We've made a decision, and we'll carry it out!"

Kiryama proceeded without a single thread of doubt, and tightly grasped Inaba(12)'s hand.

"Ina... Himeko-chan."

Taichi crouched to Inaba(12)'s eye level and looked into her eyes.

"If anything happens... I'm counting on you."

People might wonder why count on a twelve year-old girl who knew nothing of the situation. But Taichi trusted that, even at only twelve year-old, Inaba would be able to take care of the situation.

Inaba(12) silently nodded twice.

"Good luck, Taichi! Iori as well!"

Kiryama held on tight to both the now puffy, wrapped-in-adult-clothes Aoki(1) and the hand of Inaba(12), and started running back towards the abandoned building.

"I'm sorry... This is all my fault... I got everyone caught in this..."

Nagase trembled. She curled in her arms, her small body looked even smaller, as if it would disappear any minute.

"Don't worry. If my family were in danger, I would do the same too. Anyway, we should get going."

"Puff... puff... W—We're here."

"This is... puff... Nagase's house?"

Nagase pointed at an old two-story apartment.

"My house is on the wing of first floor."

"Then... Nagase, what's the status now? What's your plan? And should I go with you?"

"It might not be a good idea to have Taichi come with me... Can you wait for me out——"

——*CLINK*.

Sound of glassware breaking came out from the apartment, followed by a woman's scream.

They were from Nagase's house.

"Mom!"

Nagase shouted and rushed towards the door.

Better to keep a close eye—— Taichi thought and followed her.

"Mom! Open the door! It's me, Iori!"

Nagase banged loudly on the door and abruptly tried turning the door handle.

"You're noisy! I'm opening the door so shut up!"

A man's bellow came from the other side of the door. His voice was hoarse, probably due to drinking too much.

"...Dad..."

Nagase murmured.

Then, the door opened.

However——

Nagase, who had been standing right at the door, disappeared without a trace. Her clothes fell on the floor.

Taichi was beyond shocked by the sight——He was terrified.

He thought he was dreaming.

He could not see it clearly, but there was something small bulging among the scattered clothes.

Before his mind could even react, his body took action right away.

Taichi picked up Nagase's clothes with a tiny Nagase in them.

Without thinking twice, he fled the scene.

Angry shouting could be heard from behind, someone seemed to be pursuing them.

Taichi could not spare any moment to look back.

Were they seen?

Was Nagase's 'Time Regression' exposed?

Taichi did not know.

But he knew he had to keep running.

If he underwent 'Time Regression' as well, what would happen to Nagase and him both?

As Taichi continued to run, he helped Nagase's face out of the ball of clothes. She looked incredibly innocent.

Because Taichi was carrying a baby girl with a bunch of female clothing, the pedestrians began casting strange eyes towards him.

Taichi ran for very long distance, his legs were beginning to give in. He tried very hard, but he could no longer increase his speed.

He ran.

He passed clumsily through the crowd, and turn right whenever he ran into a red light.

There was a police patrolling with a bicycle coming from his front.

Taichi's heart began racing for no reason.

Taichi avoided eye contact, and walked right pass.

"Sir, what are you——"

As soon as he was called, Taichi fled immediately.

Taking every possible turns around corners.

He ran.

And ran.

What should he do?

What was the situation?

Did that man follow?

And the police?

Taichi's lungs were tearing apart.

The pain. His muscles were screaming.

This would not end well. He must come up with something.

Should he return to the abandoned building?

But what of Nagase's mother?

'Time Regression' had been striking them frequently.

Was Kiriya's group alright?

Taichi could not tell where he was running.

He kept running towards the less populated area.

He was losing oxygen. He could no longer think calmly.

Is this the end? He thought.

——Did I make the wrong choice?

——Should I have done differently?

But he could no longer start over.

Taichi entered a small alley.

Forward.

Then, a dead end.

There was no other way out.

Footsteps could be heard from behind.

Under the street lights, a shadow stretched across the ground.

Taichi gave in to his fate, but tried to think of a way out at the same time.

He turned around.

Standing there, was the homeroom teacher of class 1C of Yamaboshi High, as well as the advisor of Cultural Research Club——Gotou Ryuuzen.

There was no energy nor emotion, as if blended into the surrounding darkness.

His eyes were half-opened.

It was «Heartseed», the one who brought Taichi and the others into a world of abnormality.

"My, my... Good evening... It appears that you're in some sort of trouble..."

A tone that was sluggish and sloppy.

After a second look, he emitted a similar but different kind of aura compared to «Number Two».

"Uwee... Uwee..."

Baby-Nagase started crying. She seemed to have felt the unpleasant atmosphere.

"Why... Why are you showing up now... Unless... Are you the one behind all this?"

"No, no... That's not true... Oh? I thought you knew that already, don't you? Yaegashi-san..."

How much of his words could be trusted?

"Then why are you showing up now? And... Who's «Number Two»..."

"Well... Let's take care of the situation first... My, my... Ain't I a hard-working one..."

Taichi felt a sudden weight in his arms as if it was going to break his arms in half.

"What the!?"

Upon closer inspection, it was Nagase returning to normal. Since Taichi could not support her weight, Nagase fell on the floor.

"Wait... What's going on? Eh? Why am I wrapped up like this? No wait, my arm isn't in my sleeves."

Nagase readjusted her clothes and stood up.

"Taichi... What's going... Go-san! ...Ah!"

Nagase bumped into Taichi as she backed off.

"...«Heartseed»."

Nagase muttered, her shoulders quivered.

"Hm... There you have it..."

"What you mean by there we have... there we have what?"

His explanation was vague as always.

"Ah... I mean I've ended the phenomenon... There you have it."

"Ended?"

"Yes... Unless you wanted it to continue? I suppose I could let you... But I'd rather not... It will become troublesome..."

"What? So the 'Time Regression' phenomenon is over? Eh? What happened to me? Actually, what's the situation?"

Nagase stood beside Taichi and appeared very puzzled.

"Oh? ...So that's how you call that phenomenon... Anyway... Since this phenomenon was by no means my intention... I ended it..."

"Not your intention... then what's with «Number Two»? How are you related?"

"... It's a hassle to explain... We aren't exactly united... The one you called «Number Two» has his own idea of 'interest'... Ahh... I already made sure he can't interfere again, so he won't appear——"

As he was about to finish answering Taichi's question, «Heartseed» stopped short.

"Ahh... I could have ignored that question... Careless, wasn't I... Ahh, never mind that... So be it."

As usual, he did not answer properly in the end.

"Anyway, it's over now... Please give the others my greetings..."

"What you mean by greet... F—Forget about that, Mom... Taichi, what happened? My memory is cut off after when I was at the door..."

"As soon as Nagase underwent 'Time Regression', I fled the scene... We should probably hurry back."

"...Okay."

"Ahh... That's right... I almost forgot... Nagase-san."

"W—What do you want? I... I don't have time for you."

Nagase replied sharply with an alert tone.

"I believe this, for Nagase-san... might be an interesting and pleasing proposal..."

Even when they were in panic, «Heartseed» pretended it was nothing and followed his own pace.

It was infuriating for Taichi.

"Hurry and spit it out already!"

"Ahh... Yaegashi-san, there's no need to be so agitated... Actually... This is none of Yaegashi-san's business... Could you be quiet?"

Through Gotou, the mysterious, otherworldly entity glared Taichi with those dark, abyssal eyes.

With that, Taichi felt his flesh crawling.

His body repulsed by instinct.

"By now... You should know already... There's nothing you can do. Nagase-san..."

"What... What are you talking about?"

"The very thing... that you're trying to solve..."

How much did «Heartseed» know?

"You mean my Mom... and my Dad?"

"Ahh... If that's how you put it..."

He sounded as if it was not exactly correct.

"There... must be something I can do..."

"...Aren't you... the one who believe there's no way to start over?"

«Heartseed» pointed out. Nagase appeared startled.

All signs of life were drained from her face.

Taichi stood prepared by Nagase——If she collapsed, he must guard by her side.

".. Do you want to start over?"

Those were dry and flat words, yet they felt unusually sweet and alluring.

Sweet and alluring, much like the sweet secretion by carnivorous plants would be to their prey.

One could not help but to approach it, even if one was fully aware of the consequences.

"Due to... my personal mistake... I've caused everyone considerable amount of trouble. I sincerely mean it... so in order to make up... I'd like to offer you an omiyage... service... reward... none of that sound right... Anyway, I would like to offer you something nice, you may consider it my means of... gratitude."

If you really feel that way, why don't you just leave us alone to begin with? Taichi thought.

"Well then, Nagase... This, is something I can do... Do you want to start over?"

"...What you mean by start over?"

"I mean it literally... Everything that happened up till now... I can undo them, and allow you to start over from a point of your choice..."

"What!? That's like saying, I can go back to the past, and start my life over... That's ridiculous... That's not possible!"

Nagase tried to laugh it off, but failed. The corners of her mouth were twitching awkwardly.

"...that can't be possible... right?"

Nagase asked once more.

«Heartseed» only raised the corners of his mouth, stretching the muscle near his mouth and part of his face.

He was smiling.

Every part of his face were motionless... except his mouth that was smiling.

"Don't tell me that... you can change a person's past... Even though I've already seen you 'revert us back to our past selves'..."

Indeed, they were able to revert a person back to his past self.

Then, would it mean they could return a person to the past?

If one could change the past that was normally impossible to change.

If one could choose a different option at a fork road in the past.

"Do you want to start over?"

«Heartseed» asked again.

His tone was oddly filled with more energy than usual.

This small difference made his offer sounded multiple times more alluring.

"I... I..."

—*If I ever have the chance to start over, I would take that chance.*

—*And, if I can play better the role of my character, I would do that as well.*

Those were Nagase's words back then. They echoed clearly in Taichi's mind.

Now that he thought of it, those words must have been Nagase's call for help.

Yet, Taichi did not notice and could not offer any help.

At that moment, a giant ark unreachable by Taichi embarked before Nagase.

All Nagase needed to say was "Let me board" and the ark would sail on.

She would be gone.

She would be heading towards a place where he could never reach again.

Nagase spoke. Her words were like ripple on water, disturbed yet quiet.

"I... I've always wished to be my true self... One that isn't an act... One that I can say proudly that... This is 'me'..."

This was Nagase's wish since the beginning.

"...I'm not gonna say my life was a misfortune... but I did feel that way a little... If I could... live more differently, more normally..."

If Nagase had a different past, she probably would not lose her sense of self, let alone troubled.

She could have been a pure and dazzling girl, and not one who masked herself a frail, phantasmic beauty due to traumas from the past.

She could have been gleaming with light of hope.

"Which is why, I..."

Don't go—— Taichi could not say it.

Don't do it—— Taichi could not say it.

Because he knew how much Nagase was suffering.

He also knew he was powerless.

"I..."

Now that he recalled it, all three phenomenon that happened till now had shaken Nagase considerably.

Then, as she was shaken and vulnerable, «Heartseed» offered the option.

As though it was planned from the beginning.

Taichi felt powerless, as if sucked into a vortex, unable to resist and could only go along the flow.

He could only go along the flow...

A certain warmth spread through his left hand.

A breath of life slowly circulated his body.

It was a feeling of relief not unlike what a drowning victim would feel when managing to grab onto a life ring.

When Taichi came back from his thoughts, he noticed he was holding on to Nagase's right hand.

Words flowed naturally:

"I've always loved you, Nagase."

"Please be quiet, Yaegashi-san."

«Heartseed» promptly and unusually quickly interrupted Taichi.

Taichi hoped that Nagase could feel him, that he could confirm Nagase for who she was.

Nagase trembled lightly.

She remained motionless and stood there.

But soon, Nagase's hand gripped Taichi's in return.

Tightly. Firmly. Determinedly.

What was incredible, was that Taichi felt the winter cold and the chill caused by «Heartseed» began fading away.

"I am who I am now because of those past in my life. If I deny the path I walked on, then I'm denying the person that I've become. I don't want to do that."

Her honest words extended through the air.

"I did think to myself that... it would be nice to start over. However, by that I meant to challenge my mistakes again. I don't want to deny my memories and pretend that they never happened."

To undo your past mistakes and pretend they never happened, and then start over?

Or to accept you past mistakes and learn from experience, and then start over?

The two options sound similar, but differs greatly.

To start over, and to deny your past, the two path differs greatly in many different way.

"I have... striven with the best of myself. I cannot erase... the person that had once striven with everything she'd got. That is wrong. Not to mention, after seeing those who lived every minute of their lives at their best, how could I bring myself to do that?"

Did she mean Aoki and Kiriya?

Nagase tightened her grip on Taichi's hand once more.



"More importantly, now I have companions that I want to witness the future with."

Their hands held onto each other, fingers crossed with each other.

"I've become who I am because of what I've accumulated from my past. If I'm missing any of that, then I will no longer be who I am right now."

Nagase valued them greatly.

"Therefore, if it means erasing my past, then I don't need to start over!"

Nagase, with her small gesture, firmly rejected the invitation. And invitation offered by the overwhelming, powerful, and destructive abnormality that would devour everything.

Nagase completed such feat.

After receiving a decisive 'No', «Heartseed» stood motionless without a word.

The time before his next response felt like eternity.

Did Nagase's answer surprise him?

"Ah... I see..."

He sounded as if it was a pity, but also content at the same time. There was a certain undefined, slight traces of sentiment from that simple response.

"...In that case there's nothing left to be settled... Well then... Good enough... I'm done..."

«Heartseed» shook his head.

Nagase looked towards Taichi, her eyes were never clearer and more beautiful.

"Let's go, Taichi."

"...Alright."

They let go of each other's hand, and ran forward.

Their battle against the abnormality had ended.

Next, they needed to confront their problem of this reality.

The two ran forward.

They passed by «Heartseed», and left «Heartseed» alone at the location.

They left «Heartseed» alone, and ran forward.

To solve problems in reality, there is no super power nor miracle to rely on.

One can only try foolishly, clumsily and persistently.

Taichi and Nagase, both out of breath, finally returned to Nagase's house.

They were worried whether the situation had gotten worse, but it seemed Nagase's father had not returned since he had first left. According to Nagase's mother: "He grabbed some cash and ran out, he probably went to drink."

Then, the two now sat in seiza-style^[8] on the sitting pads.

The room was a washitsu^[9], with a small table in front of them. It was a very simple room.

"...Please."

Nagase's mother entered the room, with a tray of hot tea in her hands.

"Ah, thank you very much..."

It would be impolite not to take the offer, so Taichi picked up one of the tea and started drinking.

As he was drinking, he peeked at Nagase's mother's face.

She's like a crafted piece of art—This was Taichi's initial impression.

Wearing only a light make-up, she looked as if she were a beautiful masterpiece created by a devoted artist.

At the same time, she lacked utility, as if disconnected from the daily life.

She did not seem to express much emotion.

Which was probably why Taichi felt she was like a crafted piece.

However, there were traces of a bruise on her face.

"Erm... Is it alright for us to be this relaxed?"

Nagase inquired her mother.

Her mother's clothing were simple, but emitted the quality of a well-raised lady. Taichi could not imagine what kind of work she did or what sort of life she lived.

"It's alright. He won't be back for a while... I think."

"'You think' huh... Oh!"

Taichi realized his rudeness and shut his mouth.

Nagase's mother looked towards Taichi.

There would be no turning back if he were captivated——Taichi had such feeling.

"So... What happened?"

Nagase's mother sat in front of Taichi and Nagase.

"Er... Well..."

Nagase scratched her face with her finger, seemingly lost for words.

"Don't worry, you can tell me everything."

Nagase's mother said.

Her voice was clear as a spring, as if she was saying "I know everything."

"If it's about having a baby, then it's something worth celebrating for."

"...(Choke)!"

Taichi almost spat his tea from his mouth.

"W-W-W-Wait, Mom! THAT · IS · IMPOSSIBLE——!"

Taichi was unsure how to respond, but Nagase was swinging her arms frantically.

"Oh, in that case, were you two planning to elope but decided to drop by first?"

"No no no NO! You got it all wrong!"

"Really?"

Seeing her daughter embarrassingly denied her assumptions, Nagase's mother simply nodded.

Can't believe she had the same kind of imagination as Kiriya's sister, Taichi thought. She seems to be a strange person too.

However, thanks to the awkward conversation just now, the mood of the room seemed to have lightened.

"Ahem, anyway... Erm... Mom...?"

Nagase lowered her head, still lost for words.

"Yes?"

"...Mom, do you still... love that man? Are you happy with him?"

"No."

She answered in a split second.

"Eh?"

Nagase lifted her head in surprise.

"Eh? Uh... Is that really?"

"Yes. I mean, I did love him before. But definitely not now."

The mother and daughter did not seem to have discussed this topic before.

Nagase intended to fight alone before.

"Then why... Why do you let a man you don't like brood in your home like that?"

The daughter asked her mother a question she tried to ask before.

Nagase's mother answered swiftly:

"Because I feel Iori were searching for something. A feeling along the lines of starting over."

"Eh... me?"

Nagase was caught by her tongue.

"That's right. Was I wrong?"

"N-No! No... I mean, yes... was I? I wanted to start over, and play my role better..."

"Right?"

Nagase's mother seemed pleased with herself.

"But... That was all for Mom's sake..."

"Was it?"

"No, I guess in the end it was for myself... but if Mom didn't want that, then I wouldn't want that either... Strange."

Nagase seemed puzzled.

"Strange. Then why am I doing this to begin with...?"

Could it be...

"...Excuse my interruption as an outsider, but could it be... the two of you have never discussed about... how to deal with that man?"

As Taichi inquired, the mother and daughter both nodded at the same time.

That's not gonna work, is it? Taichi couldn't help but to think that.

While he did not know how well they could read each other's mind, he could be certain that telepathy isn't going to solve everything.

"Er... I thought Mom let him in because she wanted to start anew with him..."

"I thought Iori wanted to start anew with him, so even though I hate him, I figured I would just swallow it."

In the end, the mother and daughter were acting for the sake of each other.

Yet they mistaken each other's true feelings and took the wrong course of action.

Could it be they never told each other the most important message?

"Why... Mom... You hated that man, why do you swallow it like that..."

The daughter asked. Nagase's mother answered without a second thought:

"Iori, I just want you to be happy. I don't matter."

Could this be Nagase's mother's resolution? One that stemmed from her regrets of not considering her daughter's feelings, causing distress to her daughter, hence she swore to let her daughter live a desired life?

The next moment, Nagase also spoke her true feelings to her mother.

Those were words filled with tears of warmth and gentleness.

"Mom... If Mom isn't happy... then I can't be happy either."

They probably shared the same sentiment since a long time ago, but they never managed to let each other know.

And now, they finally exchanged their feelings.

The two looked at each other without word nor expression.

It was a strong family bond that was visible by the naked eyes.

Because they had already said the most important thing.

Taichi thought to himself: 'Relying on others' seemed difficult.

In the end, we ourselves are the one to make the first step. We are the only ones who can push ourselves forward. Those were Kiriya's words, and Taichi agreed.

There are times that we need be resolute and strive with our own power.

However, if we are overly resolute—we might become oblivious to opinions, let alone asking for help.

Especially for people who are persistent.

How much should we rely on others? When should we start relying on ourselves?

It really depends. More accurately speaking, there isn't a right answer.

Which is why people make mistakes.

However, people also learn from mistakes.

After a long moment of silence, Nagase's mother spoke:

"Then Iori, you don't want that man to stay in the house?"

"I... I feel it's more important for me and Mom to live happily."

"Is that so?"

The feelings that missed each other before were aligned.

As if waiting for this moment, someone began knocking at the entrance with loud bangs.

"Hey! Why did you lock the door! Open the door, damn it!"

It was that man's hoarse voice.

"He's back!"

"What should we do?"

Nagase and Taichi said respectively and tried to stood up, but Nagase's mother beat them to it.

She pressed on the two's shoulders and forced them to sit down.

"This is something for your mom to settle."

"Eh? But Mom...!"

"It will be fine."

That moment, Nagase smiled for the first time.

A smile to comfort her daughter.

A gentle smile, but strong-willed. Nagase and Taichi could only watch.

Nagase's mother walked towards the entrance, unlocked the door and stepped outside.

Then, she yelled:

"I've been putting up with you all these time but I have no reason to let you squat here any longer you loser! Now get lost you piece of trash! Don't you dare come near my house again you hear me!!?"

Mothers... are incredibly powerful.



Nagase's mother gave her ex-husband a good grounding.

They were unsure what exactly happened, but the man knelt on the floor and swore "I'll never come again."

The commotion had disrupted the neighborhood. After properly apologizing, the problem was settled nicely.

As everything came to a close, it felt like nothing ever happened.

Perhaps most of the problems in the world are in fact simple like this.

Yet, people tend to take the wrong turn and missed the simple solution.

Taichi and Nagase strolled side by side in the winter town.

They did not hold hands.

"Now that I think of it... I really didn't do anything of use... Sigh..."

Taichi sighed again.

"Really? Taichi was active as ever. I was only able to hold on with you by my side in the end. If you weren't there... Just thinking about it gives me goosebumps."

Did he give Nagase the 'one thing' she needed to change the outcome?

"...But I failed, and I made a terrible decision..."

"I~ Keep~ Telling~ You, that's not how it is. Well, I guess you can say it is... but Taichi did the most important thing for us. Maybe because it was so natural that we didn't notice. But you just need to know that the most important thing is 'granted' all along!"

Nagase said jokingly.

If he really could help by being 'granted', Taichi would be very happy.

He felt slightly better.

Reflecting on yourself is a good thing, but being depressed is not. He must look forward.

However, there was one thing he wanted to confirm:

"By the way, Nagase, about what you said to that man in the end..."

"You want to ask why I said 'thank you'?"

When that man disappeared into the streets, Nagase lowered her head slightly and said "Thank you."

"How should I put it..."

Nagase skipped forward, and blocked in front of Taichi.

"Even though a lot has happened, but it's because of you, that I've become the person I am now. Thank you——That's how I think of it."

No matter what kind of past we lived, it will become a part of us.

If we think like that, then perhaps we should be grateful towards everything.

Even though Taichi felt it would be very difficult to think that way.

"...However, if you ask if I really do think that way, that's another story."

Not surprisingly, she could not let go completely just yet.

"But if I continue my hatred, I will stagnate. If I forgive, on the other hand, I can move forward."

Nagase accepted everything, and gave off a cheerful and lively smile.

"I truly mean it... Thanks to everybody, that I've become what I am here. Thank you, Taichi. Thank you very much, and I gotta thank everybody else too."

Nagase said and walked forward.

Nagase Iori let go of her past, and moved forward.

The street lamps and the moon in the sky shined brightly in the winter night. And Nagase's figure felt brighter than any of them.

Epilogue - Simply Words

Mihashi Chinatsu, who was visiting her father, would be taking the bullet train in the afternoon home——She heard this from the Mihashi household.

Now that she thought about it, since Mihashi's parents had already divorced, Mihashi Chinatsu's surname was no longer 'Mihashi'. But that wasn't important now.

Hurry, dash, I can make it.

I can still start over, I can still make up.

Kiriyama Yui ran as quickly as she could.

Was she too late?

Don't worry about that.

Don't stop because of that.

As long as I take a step, I can move forward no matter what.

Would she make it?

I have to.

I have to make it.

Without relying on anyone but myself.

Run forward.

Run forward.

Run forward like I've never done before.

And then, Yui finally saw the the figure of Mihashi, who was about to depart.

"Mihashi-san!"

Yui called out, and Mihashi Chinatsu jolted in surprise. She turned around.

"Kiri... yama?"

Her ponytail swung slightly.

Her usually keen and stern face was now only filled with puzzlement.

"T—Thank goodness I made it!"

Truth to be told... Yui really thought that she wouldn't make it.

"S—So what do you want? You gave up karate already... and you won't tell me why, either. Not to mention you were the one who told me to back off, and now..."

"I'm really sorry about what happened back there! And I'm sorry about breaking the promise! Actually, there are many things I want to say sorry to you about!"

Yui earnestly apologized to Mihashi.

She felt she had to apologize for her misdeeds.

To move forward, she must first apologize.

"I—It's embarrassing to see you apologize like this..."

Mihashi appeared hesitant for a moment, then she murmured:

"...Er, I was a little harsh back there too... I keep feeling that... ever since my parents divorced and I moved out of this town... I left something behind here..."

those feelings sorta merged with that promise with KiriYama... I—I'm not quite sure..."

Yui's feelings were conveyed to Mihashi, and Mihashi seemed to be willing to do the same.

"Uh, never mind that... so, what are you here for?"

"Ah, about that... I have something to tell you, Mihashi-san."

"Just say it already."

"Hm, I'm telling you that..."

Mihashi did not look very pleased, but upon careful look, one could see traces of anticipation in her eyes.

It took very careful observation to see it, though.

"I... am going to start practicing karate again."

"Eh!? Why... are you practicing again?"

Ah, I could have sworn I saw Mihashi's mouth raised for a moment. She averted her face to hide her expression.

She used to think Mihashi was scary, but after a second look, Yui thought she was actually quite cute.

As long as they looked at each other properly and carefully observed for each other's signals, they could understand each other's feelings.

Alright, Yui prompted herself. It's my turn to tell her my feelings.

She was sure of it.

Once they understood each other, something would change.

"That's because I realized that I had been escaping all this time. Because I know there's gotta be a solution."

"T—Then, are you going to withdraw from that strange club, and join the karate club or a dojo?"

"I won't withdraw from the CRC."

"Why... do you persist in that seemingly pointless club?"

Mihashi said, displeased.

"Perhaps it is pointless."

Yui said, and smiled wryly.

"It is pointless, but it also means something important to me."

"...What do you mean?"

"Should I say, it's important because you can't see the point in it? Uhhh.... It's really hard to put in words..."

It was very difficult to relay this feeling. If she refused to feel it, she probably would not understand.

But Yui tried her best to put it in words.

"Erm... It's like sparkles. That space, and the things we do together. Not to mention, as long as everyone's together, I can sparkle brightly too, like glittering stars."

Yes, that was the truth.

Very bright, very warm.

Even though it may not have meant anything, she felt it was the most precious thing to her.

"Hence, I'm going to keep up with both karate and the CRC."

"...Are you sure you can grow stronger like that? I mean, I know you're talented but..."

"I don't know. But I want to try; that's why I will. I'll work hard... By the way, next time we meet in the tournament, I won't lose to you, Mihashi-san!"

She must rely on her own strength.

Couldn't do it?

Doesn't matter, just do it.

"Also, er... last time when we fought..."

"S—Sorry about that back there! I picked a fight with you on the street and I didn't even let you warm up..."

"That's what I'm trying to say! That didn't count! S—So that match was no game, right?"

"Huh?"

"That fight didn't count! Got it? It's decided then! So my match record with Mihashi-san is still perfect!"

Yui pointed at Mihashi.

I'm not gonna compromise, not gonna compromise... Yui's ultra-competitive soul told her.

"Hahaha, sure."

Yui did not recall ever seeing Mihashi laugh.

She laughed with Yui.

Why?

Was it because Yui changed?

...Hm? Wait, I remember laughing with Mihashi once.

She remembered. It was the time when...

—If I win, you will call me by name, Kiriya.

—I will call you by name when that time comes, Mihashi.

She was not sure when, but they had definitely said that before and laughed together.

Yui remembered her past feelings that were washed away. She and Mihashi...

They were really dense back then.

Both Mihashi and she.

Both were competitive and stubborn, and were karate rivals. Perhaps that was why they never got along.

Even though they only wanted to say one simple thing to each other.

They cared about each other because they were so alike; at the same time, they rejected each other for the same reason.

Up until now——No, even starting from now.

She cared, but she would not gain anything from waiting alone.

On the other hand, if she desired it, she could obtain anything.

Even things from the past.

But of course, things from the past can't possibly be exactly the same as they were before.

However, one will always have a chance to start over.

No, not 'will have a chance', but rather 'can create a chance.'

Once she put her heart into it, she could create as many chance as she liked.

If she wanted to be friends, she should've just asked for it honestly.

If she wanted help, she should've just asked for it honestly.

If she wanted to do something, she should've just kept doing it until she was satisfied.

Perhaps the world has been that simple all along.

Truly important things can be easily discovered.

Nothing difficult nor sophisticated.

Or should she say, things that are easily discovered are probably the truly important things.

If she paid attention, she would discover more; if she put her heart into it, she could obtain more.

All she needed was a little bit of courage.

Therefore, first thing first——Yui must start here.

"L—Let's exchange email addresses, Chinatsu."

"L—Let's exchange email addresses, Yui."

...Eh? Did Mi—Chinatsu and she say the exact same thing?

+ + +

Once again we were caught in a serious crisis, but thanks to my friends we made it through again.

It was amazing.

I truly believe that the CRC was something special.

They probably think I was 'amazing' too.

It wasn't self-indulging or anything. We really believed each other to be amazing in some way.

This is the ideal bond.

Hereafter, however, will I continue to follow this feeling?

If that's the case, that means...

Never mind that for now.

My friends are truly nice people. They've all been taking good care of me.

Especially Taichi, who had been so helpful to me.

I feel truly grateful, but also sorry towards him.

Taichi is a very nice person.

He's truly a nice person.

He's a nice person.

But do I——Nagase Iori——truly love Yaegashi Taichi?

I keep having such thoughts lately.

(Kokoro Connect 3 Random Past The End)

Author's Notes

Thank you for picking up this book.

This is the third volume of the «Kokoro Connect» series. The first volume was «Kokoro Connect: Random People» and the second volume was «Kokoro Connect: Random Wounds».

Even if you start with this volume, you should still be able to enjoy it... probably. But since it is a series, if you could first read the previous volumes, you would be able to enjoy this book more.

That was the preface. I am Sadanatsu Anda.

The «Kokoro Connect» has entered its third installment.

This is all thanks to you and every reader's support. Thank you very much.

I would hope you can all continue to support my work... It feels odd to be asking a favor from readers like that.

If I can work hard and continue to make my work interesting, I'm sure every reader out there will continue to support it; if my work becomes boring, naturally nobody would support it.

To sum it up, Sadanatsu Anda will continue to work hard and make his work good!

If you think "Hey, this author works hard!" ... Actually, if you think "Hey, this book is interesting", then please do continue to support my work!

Sadanatsu Anda will sprint forward with everything he's got!

Let's change the topic.

In fact, editor-sama gave me an order: I must decide an abbreviation for «Kokoro Connect» and write it in the Author's Notes.

Well then, I'm going to list out what I got from all kinds of potential candidates, the carefully chosen official abbreviation for «Kokoro Connect» series!

Behold—

'Kokoroco!' 'Kokoroco!' 'Kokoroco!' 'Kokoroco!' 'Kokoroco!' 'Kokoroco!' 'Kokoroco!'

How's that? I figure it might take some getting used to, so I said it seven times!

Once you heard it seven times, does it feel natural now?

Oh? Not enough?

In that case, please repeat it yourself seven times.

After a few times, you will get used to this abbreviation 'Kokoroco', and eventually forget about other 'that sounded nicer' ones... Great! This is perfect!

"Was there really the need to brainwash us like that to get used to an abbreviation?"

Please don't say that!

Well then, here's my thank-you speech!

As mentioned at the beginning of the Author's Notes, thank you for every reader's support. It is only thanks to you that this book got to be published, thank you.

Also, all of those who helped with the publication of this book (especially editor-sama), I thank you deep from my heart.

And then, Shiromizakana-sensei, I sincerely thank you for drawing such beautiful illustrations for this book. It really thanks to Shiromizakana-sensei that we have «Kokoro Connect». Thank you for looking after us.

Finally, a little bit of promotion. The manga of «Kokoro Connect» will begin running on Famitsu COMIC CLEAR's website soon (depending on when you read this book, it might probably have begun). Please look forward to the CRC members drawn by CUTEK-sensei! Thank you very much!

Once gain, I sincerely thank every reader who picked up this book.

August 2010, Sadanatsu Anda.

ちび青木
好きです♡

ありがとう
ございました。

References

1. ↑ Hatsumode (初詣) is the first shrine visit of the New Year in Japan.
2. ↑ A different way to refer to an elder brother.
3. ↑ Underclassman, someone who was in a lower grade. There are social-cultural implications of this that aren't present in Western society.
4. ↑ Toshikoshi Soba (年越し蕎麦): Soba is eaten on New Year's Eve in most areas of Japan as an old tradition.
5. ↑ Ken(県): Prefectures of Japan. In the novel they never specified which prefecture Aoki was going to, but merely called it 'M 県'.
6. ↑ Omiyage (土産、おみやげ): Souvenir, usually food like candies or other edibles. Usually bought by the travelers for those who did not make the trip.
7. ↑ In Heaven and On Earth, No One is Noble but Me (天上天下 唯我独尊): A Buddhist saying by Gautama Buddha. Buddha said that "Each person is the precious one. There must be something that only each individual person can do." It was often misinterpreted as "I am the most respected person" as shown by Yui's example.
8. ↑ Seiza (正座): Literally "proper sitting", is the Japanese term for the traditional formal way of sitting in Japan.
9. ↑ Washitsu (和室): "Japanese-style" room.

Disclaimer

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Project : [Kokoro Connect](#)
Author : Sadanatsu Anda
Illustrator : Shiromizakana
Translator : [Lantern](#)
Editor : [Arczyx](#), [Shiina](#), [Michpig](#)
PDF Maker : [Arczyx](#)